THE VENGEANCE OF THE IVORY SKULL

MARION HARVEY

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THE VENGEANCE OF THE IVORY SKULL

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BY

MARION HARVEY

AUTHOR OF
"THE MYSTERY OF THE HIDDEN ROOM"

NEW YORK
EDWARD J. CLODE

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To My Mother
in memory of the old Rio days.

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CHAPTER I

ROOM 402

THE longer I knock about this old world of ours, and I have wandered far and wide over the face of the globe, the more convinced I become that nothing is wholly left to chance; for only a preordained fate could have willed that I should see the beginning and the end of a mystery which involved three continents and taxed the ingenuity of one of the best minds in the United States. Nor do I regret my share in the game that was played (your archæologist is well infected with the virus of adventure), since I was not only afforded the opportunity of renewing acquaintance with a city more fascinating than a beautiful woman to a man of my temperament, but also because I returned to America richer by a memory and the gift of a rare curiosity, the smallest and most perfect human skull ever carved from a piece of ivory.

It lies before me on the desk as I write and the malignant gleam of its infinitesimal emerald eyes, as

though it would remind me of that end to which all of us must come, brings back to me that morning in June which saw the beginning of the strange and direful events into which I became irresistibly drawn.

I had just returned from a trip to Egypt, and being homeless like all nomads, I put up for the interim that I expected to be in New York at the Hotel Magnificent. I had been domiciled two days when one morning about ten o'clock as I was leaving my room I encountered a chamber-maid running down the carpeted hall toward me and shrieking at the top of her voice. Amazed at this seeming lack of discipline in an otherwise well-ordered establishment, I grasped the girl by the shoulder and demanded to know what was wrong.

"Oh, sir, he's dead," she sobbed, terror-stricken. "Somebody's done for him, they have."

"Dead?" I exclaimed, horrified; and when she continued merely to weep and nod her head, I shook her impatiently. "Speak up, my girl. Who's dead?"

"That—that dago man in 402, sir," she gulped.

I waited to hear no more. Calling to the frightened girl, "Go and get the manager," I hurried down the hall to 402. The man she referred to was not Italian but Brazilian, Benjamin Garcia by name, and only yesterday we had lunched together at his invitation when he discovered that I had once visited his native land. And now he was dead, murdered!

Nonsense; it could not possibly be; such things did not happen to gentlemen. He was probably asleep and seeing him still in bed at this hour the girl had taken fright. She had left the door ajar and I stepped across the threshold boldly, determined to test the accuracy of my deduction. One step I took in the room, then I flung up my hand to shut out the awful sight that met my eyes.

In an easy chair beside the window lay Benjamin Garcia, fully dressed, in his heart a dagger and on his distorted face such a look as is seen only on the countenances of the damned, such a look as one might imagine the lost souls in Dante's Inferno to have worn!

The arrival of the manager and his horrified exclamation startled me into action once more.

"The police," I said. "Call the police."

The manager, who like all of his kind cared more for the reputation of the hotel than for the avenging of a crime, looked at me suspiciously. To prevent the question which I saw formulating itself on his thin lips I told him how I came to be present in that room of death. He listened courteously enough; and when the little maid, standing tremblingly in the doorway, corroborated my statement, he addressed a young clerk who had arrived with him.

"Tell the house detective to come up here and telephone the police. You needn't come back."

The clerk reluctantly departed with many a backward glance, hoping no doubt that the manager would recall him, but that sleek individual had already dismissed the youth from his mind. He turned to me.

"Do you know this man?" he inquired. "I don't mean merely his name. I got that from the register. Are you acquainted with him?"

"No. I lunched with him yesterday but only because he was lonely and I had friends whom he chanced to know. I had never seen him before to my knowledge," I replied.

At this moment the house detective presented himself before us, but so quietly did he come that I did not know he was there until the manager began to speak.

"You're a fine specimen of a detective," said the latter angrily, waving his hand toward Garcia. "What do I employ you for, anyhow? How dare you let a thing like this happen in my hotel? What do you——?"

"Cut it, Mr. Bell," interposed the detective coolly. "I can't be in two places at once. Didn't you tell me to get the dope on that Dalton couple? Well, that's what I was doing when this happened."

Before the manager could interrupt, his face purple with suppressed rage, I hastened to pour oil on the troubled waters.

"The damage is done. Bickering won't undo it. Supposing we get busy and try to find out how it happened and who is responsible," I remarked, calmly.

"That's the ticket," responded the detective amiably, sauntering toward Garcia with his hands in his pockets.

"I wouldn't disarrange things too much, though," I continued. "The police will be here any minute, now."

A look of disappointment spread over the sallow face of the man as he bent to examine the body; then he smiled sourly, and remarked, "It's up to me to beat them at it, then. Police detectives ain't much on solving mysteries."

"And I suppose you are a wizard at that sort of work?" inquired a new voice.

I turned and saw entering the doorway a physician, an inspector, and two burly policemen. It was the inspector who had made the remark in a rather caustic tone. Evidently he was no more pleased with the occurrence than the manager had been. I had always imagined, probably because I had never given the subject much thought, that the police were more or less delighted when a crime was committed as it provided them with occupation; but I presume that a steady diet of crime becomes as unpalatable as a steady diet of anything else. And the police had their reputations to maintain as well. No wonder, then, that the inspector looked annoyed and chewed savagely upon the stump of

a cigar. Beyond the dead body there was nothing, not a clue of any kind, apparently, to hint as to the identity of the murderer; for even the weapon was part of the equipment of the hotel, the steel paper-cutter supplied with every desk. It was a powerful blow that could wield so blunt a dagger so effectively, I decided.

While the doctor determined the exact manner of death, the inspector addressed the manager who stood in the center of the room with a worried look on his sharp face.

"Can you find out for me whether this man had any callers last night?" asked the former, shifting the cigar to the other side of his capacious mouth.

"Yes, Inspector. I'll secure the information for you immediately." The manager departed on his errand and the inspector turned his attention to the maid.

"You discovered the crime, did you not?" he inquired in a kindly tone when he saw how frightened she was. He was gray-haired and portly, and doubtless had daughters of his own.

"Yes, sir," was the low reply as the girl twisted her apron nervously.

"Tell me about it. You need not be afraid. No one is going to accuse you." The inspector laid a fatherly hand on her thin shoulder as he spoke.

"I'm supposed to clean the rooms on this floor, sir," she answered, giving him a gratefully tearful look.

"I always start here at this end. I knock and if there's no answer I open the door with my pass key. I—the door was open, so I walked in and then I saw him——" She shuddered and paused.

"The door was open, you say? Do you mean merely unlocked or was it standing open?"

"Just closed to, sir. I knocked and he—he didn't answer. I thought he'd gone out and forgot to lock it. He's a dago and don't always understand, sir."

The inspector looked across at me. "So, he's Italian, eh?"

"Not at all. He is a Brazilian."

"A friend of yours?"

"No, but I have exchanged a few words with him. He told me among other things that he expected to sail for home at the end of the month. I believe he had his passage engaged," I replied.

The inspector found no time to comment upon this information. The doctor was calling us excitedly. We crossed the room to the window and joined the two men who were gazing down with such intentness upon the victim of this tragedy, and the doctor broke at once into eager speech.

"He's been dead since midnight, Inspector, stabbed through the heart by this knife. Do you notice that the murderer has avoided plunging the knife through the thickness of coat and vest and has introduced it

from above in such a way that the resistance from the man's clothing was the least possible? With a weapon as blunt as this one such a precautionary measure was necessary to insure success. We can infer from that that the murderer probably stood behind the chair and struck when his victim's attention was engrossed elsewhere."

"The evils of dolling up in the evening," commented the house detective drily. "If he hadn't donned his tail-coat the murderer could not have reached his heart so easily."

We did not stop to discuss this side of the affair. The doctor had more news for us. "Look here, Inspector," he said. With a dramatic gesture he flung open the dead man's shirt and pointed to the bared chest.

Seared into the flesh by the action of some powerful acid was the imprint of a tiny, human skull!

Fascinated I gazed upon the brand, more engrossed by the perfection and flawlessness of the impression than by its significance until the inspector's voice roused me from my abstraction.

"Branded after he was dead?" the police official was echoing in perplexity. "If he was Italian, I'd say it was one of those darned blackhand societies that was responsible." He swung around in relief as the manager reëntered. "Well?" he demanded.

"The night clerk has some information for you, In-

spector. Here he is now. He can give it to you better than I," returned the manager, ushering forward a sharp-eyed, lantern-jawed young man who looked as though he were thoroughly wide awake and up to snuff. He spoke concisely and callously, not in the least affected by the sight of that poor dead body which a few hours ago had been a living sentient creature.

"About seven last night a man came up to the desk and asked for this fellow here," said the clerk with a nod of the head toward the chair and its burden. "I phoned up to 402 and was told to send the guy up."

"Just a moment," broke in the inspector. "Did he give you his name?"

"Sure. He said it was Gilbert Parrish, but he looked kind of like a foreigner, so thought I to myself, 'That's not your name at all. You can't deceive the likes of me.' However, if 402 was satisfied, it was none of my business what the man called himself. A half-hour later those two, Parrish and this fellow here, crossed the lobby to the dining-room as friendly as two turtle doves. About nine o'clock I saw them leave the hotel still as thick as thieves. 402 of course left his key with me and at eleven back they came and asked for it. When I was going off duty around twelve-twenty or so, I saw the other fellow come down the stairs and leave the hotel."

"Didn't it occur to you as very fishy that he should

walk down four flights with the elevator handy?" asked the inspector irritably.

The clerk smiled superciliously and stroked what he fondly assumed to be a mustache. "Those foreigners are queer ducks. No elevators for them. Most of them use the stairs unless they happen to be on the tenth or fifteenth floors."

"You can identify this man if you saw him again?" continued the inspector anxiously.

"Surest thing you know. I could pick him out of a million," was the boastful reply.

"Describe him to me." The inspector drew out a notebook and his fountain pen, and the crease between his eyes faded as he began to believe that the end of his task was in sight.

"He was tall, dark, well-set up, well-dressed," dictated the clerk glibly.

The inspector stopped him with an angry snapping together of the covers of the book. "And how many hundreds of men are tall, dark, well-dressed?" he remarked cuttingly, for he thought the clerk was making game of him.

"Hold your horses, old fellow," retorted the clerk serenely. "I can pick him out because he limps and across his right cheek he has a livid semicircular scar!"

CHAPTER II

THE MAN WITH THE SCAR

THREE days later I was requested to attend the inquest which was a necessary preliminary to the finding of the murderer of Benjamin Garcia. There had been nothing of interest in the papers so far, and as the hotel management had refused to discuss the affair I had been left totally in the dark concerning the activity of the police. As I made my way to the court-room where the inquest was to be held, I speculated as to the possibility of a solution of the crime. Had the police discovered Parrish? And if so, what account had he to give of his movements that night?

The room was crowded with the usual spectators who attend such trials and when I had told all that I knew of the dead man and the manner in which I had happened to become involved in the tragedy, I took a seat fairly close to the witness chair to await with keen interest Parrish's turn to take the stand, for I had heard it whispered that the police had succeeded in unearthing him.

The doctor testified next, not only of those circumstances with which I was already acquainted but also

of a new discovery which he had made. Upon Garcia's arm was a tattoo which had been partially effaced, but so skillfully had the destruction of the mark been carried out that nothing remained but a series of lines from which it was impossible to determine the original design pricked into the flesh.

The chamber-maid and the night clerk followed the doctor, and they related what they knew at much greater length than was at all necessary, it seemed to me. Particularly did the coroner emphasize the point that Parrish and Garcia had returned to the hotel together at eleven. What this portended I was soon to know, for as the clerk left the stand, the coroner ordered Gilbert Parrish to come forward and testify.

At his words there was a stir in the court-room and down the aisle came a man such as the clerk had described, tall, dark, fashionably dressed, a man whose extraordinary grace of figure was belied by a halting limp and whose uncommon facial beauty was marred by an ugly scar. His unusual appearance created quite a sensation, but unfortunately his testimony which was anything but convincing, and his past, which the police were careful to bring forward in the worst possible light, told against him and turned the tide of public opinion. I found myself unconsciously pitying the fellow, for the story that he told was after all straightforward enough.

"Several years ago," he began in a pleasant voice with the slightest of foreign accents, "I met Benjamin Garcia abroad. Hearing that he was in the city I called upon him."

"One moment," interrupted the coroner. "Did you meet him in one of those gambling resorts which you and your kind frequent for the purpose of fleecing the unsophisticated?"

The dark face of the man in the witness-box remained unclouded by the other's offensive tone. It was as if the words passed him by, as though he were on too high a plane to stoop to notice an attempted insult.

"It is true," he said levelly, "that I live in a great measure by my luck at cards; but it was not in such a place that I met Garcia. A mutual friend introduced us and it was the same friend who apprised me of Garcia's presence in New York and asked me to make him feel at home. As the hotel clerk has told you I called on Garcia at the Magnificent. Had I contemplated doing him harm would I have been such a fool as to give him my name?" he inquired of the court.

"Not your name, but a name," asserted the coroner, stressing the article. "A professional card player and ne'er-do-well finds it convenient to have many aliases up his sleeve."

"You are mistaken, sir," returned the witness with

dignity. "I have never found it necessary to conceal my identity."

The coroner's skeptical smile showed how little credence he placed in this statement. He merely ordered Parrish to continue.

"We dined together at Garcia's invitation and later we went for a walk along Broadway. It was a glorious night and Garcia was anxious to view the gay lights and hear what I could tell him of the life of this big city during the night hours."

"Considering that you yourself had just arrived from Naples that very morning, Mr. Parrish, you could not have known any more than he did about New York's night-life," interposed the coroner in a smooth voice. "As to learning of his whereabouts and being asked to make him feel at home, well, I can only remark that you are a pretty fast worker."

"I have lived in New York before, your honor; I am at home in many cities, and it does not take a whole day to get news of one's friends. On the other hand, this was Garcia's first visit to this country." I wondered at the man's self-control as he resumed his story in the same, pleasant even tones. "I indulged Garcia's whim and we strolled along until we reached Forty-second Street. Chancing at the moment to become aware of the hour, I recalled an appointment with a man of prominence then in town whom I was particu-

larly desirous of seeing; so bidding Garcia good-night I left him at the corner. I glanced back after crossing the street and he was still standing there looking up at the electric signs. And that, your honor, is the last I ever saw of him."

When Parrish had ceased speaking, the coroner stroked his chin thoughtfully, conferred with a stocky, heavy-faced man who stood near him, and then began the cross-examination. He took up the weapon and handed it to Parrish. The latter accepted it indifferently.

"Ever see that before?" inquired the coroner sharply, his eyes on the other's face.

"Never." Parrish returned the weapon with a slight bow.

The coroner looked nonplussed, then he selected a card from his desk and extended it to the witness.

"And I suppose you will deny having seen anything like this before?" was the ironic query.

Parrish examined the card with an expression of profound surprise, almost too profound to appear really genuine. "Very interesting," he commented. "May I inquire what this pen and ink sketch, by the way it is very well done, is supposed to represent?"

The coroner retrieved the card and held it up for the benefit of the jury. "The skull drawn on that card

is an exact reproduction, Mr. Parrish, of the brand found on Garcia's chest."

"Indeed?" The man in the witness-box spoke perfunctorily as though he could not understand why he should be troubled with such trifling details. He was very much bored with his examination and with every answer the coroner was becoming more and more baffled. He hastened to arrive at the crux of the matter.

"Did you hear the night clerk testify that you had returned to the hotel with Garcia?"

"Yes," said Parrish indifferently.

"How do you reconcile to that your statement that you parted from the victim of this tragedy at Forty-second Street?"

"The clerk was laboring under a delusion. I did not return with Garcia. At the time of the murder I was in conference with the man I have mentioned before as I carefully explained to your detective this morning when he asked me to attend this inquest," was the calm reply.

"Have you any objections to telling the court who this man is to whom you have so often alluded in rather vague terms?" The coroner was growing caustic.

"None at all. He is well known in New York. His name is William K. Vardusi," replied Parrish obligingly.

At mention of this name the court sat up and blinked its eyes William K. Vardusi was a wealthy and respected member of society, a lawyer who stood at the top of his profession and was revered by his colleagues for his ability and his integrity. It had been said that Vardusi never took a case where there was the least doubt of his prospective client's right to the verdict. Surely if Parrish was acquainted with Vardusi, the former was hardly likely to be a cold-blooded murderer. Public opinion, as unstable as the mob, swayed by every breath of oratory, veered toward him; the women were whispering that he was far too handsome to be a villain; the men were declaring that he looked like a good fellow. Only the coroner seemed unimpressed. He asked Parrish to step down for a moment and give place to Mr. Vardusi's butler.

With the wholly impersonal and detached air consonant with the attitude of the perfect butler, Vardusi's servant waited to be questioned. He was slender and slightly bald and in his hand he carried a bowler on which he kept his eyes fixed in deference to the coroner.

"Was your master at home the night of the twenty-fourth?" inquired the law's minion.

"No, sir. He has been out of town since the first of the month. Got back this morning early, sir," said the man to his hat.

"Did Mr. Parrish, the gentleman who has just testified, call at the house that night?"

"No, sir. No one came to the house either that or any night," responded the butler.

"That is all. Mr. Parrish, please."

With the same aloof manner, the butler vanished from our midst as quietly as he had come and Parrish resumed the stand. His face had acquired a leaden hue and he searched that assemblage with something very near to panic in his hazel eyes; the look of the hunted stag when the baying of the pack resounds upon his heels and he senses inevitably that the end has come. So Parrish realized that he was trapped; yet he made one more desperate bid for liberty. He clung to his original story, insisting that his version of his actions upon that night was the true one and that Vardusi himself had answered the bell. Though the coroner put him through a grilling which would have shaken the nerve of a far less sensitive man all that Parrish would say was to reiterate what he had told us, a story which had been contradicted by reliable witnesses but from which he would not deviate by so much as a hair's breadth. When, worn and haggard, he was finally allowed to leave the stand and the coroner turned to address the jury, it was evident that the verdict was sure to go against him. Already the crowd, swinging to the other extreme of the pendulum, were murmuring

that the young man was a dangerous and hardened criminal.

And then just as the foreman was about to announce the decision, there came up the aisle a very wrathy and indignant member of society, a small, very dark man with bright black eyes and a gray Vandyke who raised his hand in a gesture of command and spoke to the coroner as one might reprimand a bungling servant.

"What, may I ask, is the meaning of this outrage?" he demanded in a voice of cold fury. "How dare you question the statements of a person as evidently a gentleman as Mr. Parrish? Do I look like the type of man who consorts with criminals? Let me tell you then that Gilbert Parrish is my very good and honored friend."

At this point in his tirade he paused to grasp Parrish's hand and at a low-toned injunction to lead him back to the witness stand where they stood together but oddly contrasted; the little fiery lawyer quivering with indignation, the tall, younger man so pale that the scar leaped like a live thing against the dead whiteness of his skin.

"You know who I am," declared Vardusi, vehemently. "You are personally acquainted with me, Mr. District Attorney. You all know that my word is my bond. I have come to testify in behalf of my friend and it is a lucky thing that I happened to return to town this

morning in time to prevent so monstrous an injustice as the one which was about to be perpetrated."

He glared at the offending officials who seemed literally to shrivel where they sat in the flame of his contempt, then he continued: "At twelve o'clock on the night of the murder, Mr. Parrish and I were in conference as he has informed you. I know that my butler has stated the exact contrary, but there are some things which, trusted though he is, I still do not tell my servant. This is one of them. Our conference was a secret one. To attend it I came back to town and let myself into my house after the butler had retired. I admitted Mr. Parrish and let him out. I also returned to my country house that same night. What we said or why we met in this manner is our concern, but it proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that Mr. Parrish was not at the Hotel Magnificent when this murder was committed."

With a bow to the District Attorney, Vardusi stepped down from the stand leaving Parrish alone to await the verdict. The coroner was greatly puzzled and considerably annoyed. He scratched his head; he compared notes with the other police officials; but as Mr. Vardusi was a prominent individual whom it was not politic to offend and who was hardly likely to stoop to shield a criminal, the coroner directed the jury to find that Garcia had come to his death at the hands of a person or persons unknown. Parrish was accordingly released

and the murder relegated to the limbo of unsolved mysteries, for though I watched the papers assiduously for a number of days thereafter nothing further was learned concerning the tragedy.

To me the strangest part of the whole affair was the fact that the hotel clerk always maintained that he was in the right, and that it was too far-fetched to assume that two men as startling in appearance as Parrish could possibly have come to the hotel that night. And then there were so many threads left dangling in the air. What had become of the skull that had caused the brand? What was the tattoo that Garcia had tried to efface and what induced him to take such a step? Why, if he was stabbed from behind as the doctor suggested, did fear, a soul-destroying terror, take possession of his being?

CHAPTER III

THE IVORY SKULL

A MONTH later I ran across the trail of the murder again. I had remained in New York attending to a commission for a friend, but now I was at loose ends once more and was meditating where to turn next when a letter decided me.

I am an archæologist of no mean reputation. I do not make the statement boastfully nor with any desire to be egotistical. Any person who cares to do so may verify my record, for the name of Professor Anthony Potter is a well-known one in antiquarian circles the world over.

It was therefore my custom wherever I might be sojourning at the time to dispose after breakfast of my voluminous correspondence which consisted mainly of requests from would-be collectors and dealers, those artful beings created by the Lord for the sole purpose of wheedling money from my perpetually flat purse, requests that I give them the benefit of my specialized knowledge in advising them of the true value of the articles which they were desirous of either buying or

selling. As I received letters from nearly every country on the map and some that were not, I slit the gray envelope bristling with Brazilian stamps with no greater interest than I had its predecessor from Bombay. Like all of its type it would find its way into my waste-basket after I had read the first three lines, for how could I possibly measure the genuineness of an object which I had never seen and which I had no intentions of traversing illimitable miles to view?

But when I drew out the innumerable close-written sheets, a something about the script, its old-fashioned precision perhaps, struck me forcibly and aroused a long dormant cord of memory. Hastily I turned to the signature and stared with mingled feelings of surprise and pleasure at the neat "Tom Clinton" which graced the bottom of the page. Tom Clinton of the old Rio days whom I hadn't heard from since I had left Brazil in 1906! Could it really be sixteen years since he and I had chummed it in that land of marvelous enchantment when he had led me through the wilderness in search of the burial ground of a long-forgotten tribe?

I returned to the letter and as I deciphered amidst the myriad reminiscences with which the thin gray pages were replete, the real reason for Tom's calling to mind my humble existence, the languorous charm of the lovely, lazy capital, narrow-streeted, sunless, rest-

ful, crept into my blood, quickened my pulse after a lapse of more than a decade, and stole away my senses ere I was aware. Without stopping to analyze where my best interests lay, I seized my hat, and hurrying to the nearest office cabled the one word, "Coming." Had Tom merely wanted me to come upon a visit I could not have been more eager to answer the summons than I now was to have the chance to catalogue his treasures for the approaching Exposition.

I easily secured passage on the Lamport and Holt line and on a warm day toward the end of July I ascended the gangplank of the waiting steamer in the wake of a tall young man who gave me the distinct impression that somewhere I had encountered that poise of the head and that limping walk before. But I did not catch a glimpse of his face and when I returned on deck to watch our departure, he was nowhere to be seen.

Doubtless I am a sentimentalist, or it may be that as I grow older places and events affect me more; at any rate as we steamed out of the harbor and I saw the giant buildings of New York's sky-line fading in the distance, the feeling was strong upon me that much was to happen before I beheld those sky-scrapers again. Indeed so tenaciously did the thought of disaster cling to my mind that I reproved myself sharply for a superstitious fool as I turned away from the railing and I

was just about to descend the companionway when a sudden glitter, like the glint of gold in a pan of pay-dirt, caught my eye. Stooping I picked up what I took to be a small pebble and laying it in the palm of my hand, bent my head the better to examine it.

My first glance was merely curious. My second and closer scrutiny held me rooted to the spot, for the object that I contemplated was a tiny ivory skull, marvelously perfect, exquisite, old. Four centuries or more had turned the ivory a deep yellow but had not dimmed the brilliance of the emerald stones that filled the eye-sockets, stones so small as to be almost microscopic. It was the sort of beautiful workmanship upon which the artists prided themselves in the days of Cellini and which were bestowed on kings and nobles in return for some beggarly service.

As I stood there gazing in awe-struck wonderment at the little curio, the rarest thing I had seen in all my wanderings, a figure brushed by me and without warning a hand, slim and white, closed upon the skull and snatched it from my grasp. Startled I looked up as my despoiler limped away and recognizing the back of the man whom I had previously noted I hastened after him to demand his right to an object of such incalculable value. Hearing the sound of my steps he glanced back at me for a fleeting second. At sight of that marred cheek, the ugly saber scar a livid seam in the deep

pallor of his countenance, I halted in amazement, all impulse to pursue him checked by the shock of absolute recognizance.

The man was Gilbert Parrish! And the skull was such a one as might have made the brand on the chest of Benjamin Garcia!

Every detail of the month-old tragedy returned to me in all its clearness in the sudden revelation vouchsafed me and I began to wonder whether Parrish might not have been guiltier than he was judged. I determined to have another look at the ivory skull. Then a different thought obtruded itself. Had the recognition been mutual and did he fear my inspection of his treasure? Was he afraid I might learn the secret of its use? I pondered the question and finally decided in the negative, for though he was unchanged, the sudden failing of my eyesight due to too concentrated work had forced me to adopt glasses the week after the inquest. As they were tortoise-shell rimmed and very round they gave me the aspect of a dignified owl. There was no danger of his knowing me and I had for an excuse in approaching him his unpardonable rudeness in snatching from me, as though I might contaminate it, the little ivory curio.

In pursuance of this decision, I went in search of "the man with the scar" as the newspapers had dubbed him. I found him in the stern gazing moodily over the

vast expanse of blue water with such a bitter smile lurking at the corners of his finely curved mouth that I hesitated to disturb him. But he must have divined my presence for he swung around toward me with the same savage intentness with which an animal might turn upon its tormentor; then, seeing in me a harmless individual who wanted to begin the voyage by making the acquaintance of the passengers as soon as possible, he asked quite amiably in contrast to the scowl upon his brow:

"Did you wish to speak to me, sir?"

"Yes," I returned without preamble, "a while ago I found a small curio upon the deck. I have reason to believe that you are the man who so unceremoniously relieved me of it. I have come to inquire your right to the object which, if I am any judge at all of antiques, is of considerable value," and I held out my hand to receive the skull.

The scowl deepened until it darkened his whole face as he said, harshly, "I took nothing from you, sir. You must be dreaming."

I held him with my eye. "Do you mean to deny that you are not now in possession of the ivory skull?" I demanded.

At my words he started and stared at me like one bereft of his senses. His jaw hung limp and his eyes seemed bulging from his head while over his face spread

again that leaden hue which I had noted at the inquest. He put a hand on my shoulder and shook me. "The ivory skull! Did you say you had the ivory skull in your hand?" he asked in a strangled voice.

"Yes, and some one took it from me," I retorted, shaking off his hand. "I thought it was you. You brushed past me at the moment."

He gave a laugh that sounded hollow and unpleasant to my ear. "God, I only wish I had taken it," he cried. "Do you know what it is, this thing that you held? It is the death symbol. It is accursed, accursed I tell you!"

His voice broke on a high note and with a wild gesture of despair he brushed me aside and limped hurriedly away. Dumfounded I watched him disappear from view, more bewildered by this turn of affairs than I had been before by the entire mystery of the tragedy. If Parrish had not taken the skull who had and for what purpose? Why did Parrish fear it? He had called it accursed, therefore he must have known its history. Yet at the inquest he had said he had never seen anything like the drawing of the skull which the coroner had showed him. Did he, too, anticipate an end such as had overtaken Garcia?

I had no way of answering these questions, and then suddenly a solution presented itself. Had Parrish merely been acting and did he have the skull in his

possession at the time? I had come across men before now who endowed curios with supernatural power and who feared that these powers would react against themselves if the curio should ever fall into alien hands. No doubt the sight of it in my grasp had aroused him to a frenzy and he had pretended innocence that I might not have a chance to look upon the object again. With a shrug I dismissed the matter from my mind, nor did I see the skull again during the remainder of the voyage.

As for Parrish, true to his instincts and his method of livelihood, he spent most of his time in the card room where he engaged, one after another, many of the passengers. That he was generally successful I gathered from disgruntled opponents who nevertheless returned again and again in the hope of recouping their losses. Among these latter I was astonished to note a strikingly handsome young woman whose olive skin and snapping black eyes proclaimed her of Latin origin. Later I learned that she was, as I had surmised, a native of Italy and that she bore the high-sounding title of Nita Giovanni, Contessa di Sforza.

When I first remarked her the game was at its height and all that was primitive and passionate in her nature leaped to the surface as she raised the stakes recklessly higher and higher in her endeavor to break this man who had taken from her the greater part of her fortune.

It was impossible not to admire her courage when, her last dollar gone, she rose and swept Parrish a curtsey with crimson cheeks and smiling lips, announcing that henceforth she would be seen only on deck and in the salon where she rightfully belonged.

It was a challenge that Parrish was not slow to accept and when I saw him desert the tables to pace the deck with her, I debated whether I ought not to warn him. She was a dangerous creature to meddle with. He might win her money with impunity, but if he was only amusing himself with her, and having won her affection he played her false, she would think as little of sticking a knife into him as she did of smoking the cigarette he was offering her as they conversed in undertones near the rail. After watching them for some five minutes I came to the conclusion that Parrish was quite capable of managing his own amours and would hardly thank me for interfering. So I continued to observe this affair *du cœur* from the seclusion of my deck-chair, following its checkered career with eager interest as the lady blew hot and cold by turns, since no other event worth recording broke for me the twelve days' monotony of sea and sky and sky and sea.

The night we sighted Rio de Janeiro saw the conclusion of this game of hearts. To the Captain's disgust we reached the entrance to the harbor after the booming of the sunset guns had proclaimed the closing

of the port so that we were forced to lie to outside the bay. Through the darkness I looked longingly toward the curving blaze of glory that was Rio and with the disappointed feeling of having been barred out at the very gates of Fairyland, I started down the deck to go below, barely avoiding the two figures that stood so motionless by the rail. A glance I gave them, then silently continued on my solitary way. As I slowly descended the companionway I sighed softly, finding it in my heart to envy Parrish his ultimate success in winning the glorious Nita for his own. Had I been ten years nearer thirty he should not have won her quite so easily.

CHAPTER IV

THE CLINTON HOUSEHOLD

THE next morning I arose betimes to catch a glimpse of the Rio I had known when the sun was just beginning to lift the purple shadows from the summit of the Sugar Loaf and from the distant cloud-enshrouded brow of Corcovado. Presently the deep resonant reverberation of the guns permitted our ship to slip past the twin island rocks and make her way into the harbor which is guarded on either side by the great stone forts of Santa Cruz and Sao Joao. As the steamer came to anchor near the inner fortress of Villegagnon in order that the health and customs officers might come aboard, I gave silent thanks for the opportunity which enabled me to view at my leisure the entrancing loveliness of one of Nature's most picturesque and safest harbors.

About the entrance bare gray peaks stand as barriers against the ocean's storms; within against a background of evergreen slopes and distant mist-clad mountain tops the kaleidoscopic city with its red-tiled roofs sprawls bewitchingly lovely, graceful, lazy, to the very edge of a sparkling, island-studded, sapphire bay that calm and placid as a day in summer serenely washes

the curving shores and dimpled creeks of Rio's delightful crescent beaches.

Thus did Rio present herself for my inspection in holiday dress, for I have seen the time when the bay, weary of playing the part of a miniature summer sea, had taken unto itself the prerogatives of the ocean, tossing its waves in defiance mountains high, overflowing the enbankments and even threatening to annihilate them completely. To-day there was only beauty in the scene before me and I stood drinking it in, oblivious to the fact that we had docked until a shout of "All ashore" startled me into action. Catching up my hat and my brief-case I descended the gangplank to the public square which had been laid out opposite the docks making of them a thing of adornment as well as of utility. Here I looked in vain for a sign of Tom, then made my way to the wharf where the luggage had been deposited for customs inspection.

As I stooped to unlock my trunk a clap on the back almost sent me sprawling while a booming voice declared jovially, "By the powers, Tony, if I hadn't seen your name on that trunk I'd never have known you."

I recovered my balance and grasped Tom Clinton's extended hand, but with a laugh he exclaimed, "Don't be so formal. Give me a hug for old times' sake," whereupon we fell to alternately embracing and patting one another on the back in the approved Brazilian style.

Presently he held me off at arm's length for a good look at me. "What the dickens have you done to yourself," he growled. "You're as thin as a rail, Tony, and your face is as brown and wrinkled as that of one of your beloved mummies."

Vanity was not one of my foibles. I was frankly amused at his description. "And I'm a little thin on top, too," I added. "But what can you expect from a man who spends his life in the open the way I do?"

I was mentally noting with profound astonishment how gently time had dealt with him in the interim. Except that his face was fuller and that he had grown a trifle heavier he was the same old Tom, good-natured, big-voiced, jovial.

"Where did you pick up that extra ten years?" he continued, regarding me quizzically with those bright, blue, humorous eyes I remembered so well.

"Delving continually into the past is apt to age a man," I reminded him. "But I'm not quite so dead as I may look. Besides, Tom, it's sixteen years since we've met, you know."

"Sixteen years!" he echoed incredulously. "It seems impossible. Sixteen years? Nonsense, man. Why it was only yesterday that we were breaking our way through the jungle. Do you remember the time—. But we can talk to better advantage at home," he broke off with a boyish grin. "Got anything dutiable?"

"Not unless it's cigars."

"All right. I know one of the officials personally. I'll have this stuff cleared in no time, then we'll stop somewhere for a good cup of coffee. I'll warrant you won't quarrel with me if I offer you some breakfast."

"On the contrary I'd be more apt to bless you. I'm starving," I responded.

He nodded and sauntered away, hands in his capacious pockets, until he came across the man he was hunting, a little swarthy fellow in a dark blue uniform over whom he towered like a veritable mountain. With a jerk of the head Tom conveyed the impression that he desired to speak with the official in confidence, a hint which the little man was quick to heed. There was a hurried conference, a bill skillfully changed hands, and the upholder of the law came briskly toward me. He saluted me with the suggestion of a smile, lifted the lid of my trunk, made several passes over it as though he were a conjurer who expected to remove therefrom all manner of unlooked for articles, appeared disappointed when nothing occurred, gently lowered the lid of the trunk, shifted his gaze to my Gladstone bag which had not yet been opened and marked my luggage as free from duty; all this so rapidly that I had barely followed his motions before he had vanished again among the crowd on the wharf. The bill had proved as effective as it usually does in such cases.

"I'm glad to find Rio the same in some respects," I said to Tom as we entered his car after partaking of an enjoyable breakfast at a small restaurant near the wharf. "That coffee is as delicious as of old and bribery is still an open game, I see."

"What would you?" asked Tom, lightly. "Rio may change, but the natives, never."

"Rio has changed," I remarked as Tom's chauffeur drove us rapidly down the Avenida Rio Branco toward the Beira Mar. "This boulevard shows all too clearly what the city will soon become."

I glanced as I spoke along the seemingly interminable vista of wide, hot, glaring macadam with its rows of young trees bisecting the street throughout its entire length; I looked at the broad, black and white mosaic pavements where pedestrians must walk unshaded for many a long year until the trees that line the sidewalks have grown to their full size and have put forth their foliage as a protection against the heat and tropical brilliance of the sun; and I shook my head sadly.

"I preferred the old Rio of narrow, sunless streets," I said, regretfully. "She was less obtrusive, less blatant, more soothing to the eye. It is as if one left one's sweetheart retiring, quiet, aloof, and returned to find her flaunting boldly the painted beauty of a woman of the world."

Tom remonstrated with a wave of the hand toward

the Avenida. "My dear fellow, don't let a Brazilian, my wife, for instance, hear you say that. They are proud, and justly, of this accomplishment. You would not have had the city remain what it was surely."

"Don't mistake me, Tom," I interposed, quickly. "I am not disparaging the beauty of the city; far from it. It's magnificent, superb, and as intoxicating to one's senses as the woman I compared it to. But to me it is not so alluring as the Rio of old. I'm an archæologist, remember."

"And the older and dirtier, the better you like it, I suppose. There is no accounting for tastes, Tony. However, even the very oldest inhabitants are forced to concede that in one respect at least the city is vastly improved. Let me introduce you to one of our many shore drives, the Avenida Beira Mar."

Tom spoke banteringly as we rounded the Pracca Tiradentes and swung into the boulevard that skirts the bay, but he might as well have been in earnest for the prop of my argument was knocked from under me by the revelation of gorgeousness presented to my view.

On the one side, the bay, a turquoise jewel in its magnificent setting of hills; on the other, the multi-colored villas nestling against the deep verdure of the mountains that surrounded them, each house set within its formal garden where a bewildering mass of deep purples, flaming reds, and glowing corals mingled in

riotous confusion with rose and lavender and yellow. Even the glittering white ribbon of the curving drive took upon itself an added significance.

I drew a long breath and apologized for my former hasty summary. "I'll have to admit that this drive is an improvement," I said, "and I presume that progress, that watchword of civilization, demanded the other, so there is no more to be said."

Tom only grunted by way of reply for at this point we turned through a wrought-iron gate into a drive-way which wound through a fair-sized garden, beneath the porte-cochère of the house, and around the back to the garage. As we approached the house the chauffeur slowed up and I had a chance to remark the outside of what Tom termed his "palace." Like most Brazilian residences it was a two-story, rectangular structure with balconied windows on the second floor. Originally terra-cotta it had been plastered a peculiar shade of buff, a rather pale tinge just one degree removed from white. Over the front of the house had been trained creepers and vines through whose emerald foliage peeped the deep pink of ramblers or the soft yellow of the tea rose.

The door, which strangely enough was around the side of the house, was opened for us by the *copeiro,* who corresponds to our butler, a good-looking mulatto whose

brown face was on the broad grin as he bobbed his head to us.

"Take the Senhor's bag to his room, Cesario," ordered Tom in Portuguese, then to me in English, "My wife is upstairs and she's anxious to know you."

I followed my host up the broad mahogany stairs to a room at the front of the house, a handsomely furnished drawing-room where a young and charming woman turned from the open window to greet me.

"My dear," Tom drew her hand through his arm and patted it as he addressed her in her native tongue, "allow me to present to you a friend of my youth, Professor Anthony Potter."

With an adoring glance at her husband from limpid brown eyes, she withdrew her hand and extended it to me with the gracious salutation, musically intoned, "Senhor Potter can rest assured that any friend of my husband is most welcome to my home."

It was a long time since I had spoken Portuguese, but I tackled the language bravely and was pleased to find how easily my tongue twisted itself once more around the unfamiliar syllables as I conveyed to my hostess how happy I was to know the wife of a man whom I esteemed as much as I did Tom.

"My husband is a fortunate man to have such a loyal friend," she complimented me, then called caressingly, "*Ricardo, meo querido.*"

On the instant a boy about ten years of age entered the room, and having bowed respectfully to his mother and father, held out to me a thin brown hand.

"You are my dad's friend," he said to me in prim English. "I am most happy to become acquainted with you, Professor Potter. My name is Ricardo Clinton."

Tom broke into a hearty guffaw as I gravely shook the lad's hand. "He's been learning that speech for days, the young imp," remarked the proud father, pinching the olive cheek. "Isn't he Helena all over again, Tony?"

I glanced from mother to son and indorsed Tom's fond judgment, for the boy had the same shade of chestnut hair, the same large brown eyes and bright red lips set in as delicate an oval face. There was none of Tom's hugeness about the child.

The remainder of the household I met at luncheon since Tom's next move was to conduct me to my room which lay at the other end of the long corridor and which was furnished rather severely but with a view to comfort as witness the mosquito netting around the bed, a necessary precaution in Brazil. Throwing himself into a chair, my friend proceeded to bombard me with questions while I made a desultory attempt to unpack. I got as far as unearthing the cigars, then drew up a chair to the window to enjoy undisturbed the

flavor of the perfecto and the story of the intervening sixteen years.

As the details of Tom's wanderings from the time that I left Brazil until his marriage with Helena Ramalho caused him to settle down and go into business can have no possible interest to anyone but myself I shall not burden this chronicle with them.

At luncheon, Tom, like the unconventional soul that he is, introduced me generally to his family, leaving it to me to decipher their relationship to him. That others besides himself, his wife, and his son should make their home with him hardly astonished me. The Brazilians—and Tom had lived in the country long enough to be accounted one—are very hospitable and will care for their relatives who have fallen upon evil days until such time as they are once more capable of looking after themselves. I once knew a man who sat down to table with forty extra persons every meal, relations on both sides of the house, whom he supported and who kept him comparatively poor despite his large income.

So, as I said before, I was not surprised that Tom should number among his household his wife's relatives. There were three of them, her sister, her brother, and the brother's wife.

Maria Theresa Ramalho, the sister, was barely eighteen, a lovely, clear-skinned, black-eyed girl as

charming as Dona Helena and as insouciant as her brother, Duarte, who was as dark and dashing as a hero in a play. No wonder, then, that he had captivated Judith St. John, a piquant, little Virginian, the daughter of the American Consul, captivated her to such an extent that she had actually married him, a rash act for a girl of her temperament. Being American and hot-tempered, she was not likely to tolerate, what most Brazilian women shut their eyes to, the infidelity of her husband. As I noted the involuntary contraction of Judith's fair face whenever her gray eyes strayed toward her husband I began to wonder whether there were not an undercurrent of unhappiness in the apparent tranquillity of Tom's home and whether the girl were not already chafing against the indissoluble tie which bound her to one as devil-may-care as the young Brazilian.

There was yet another person at the table who intrigued me, Neville St. John, Judith's brother, a blonde young giant who divided his time between bending ugly looks upon Duarte Ramalho and sending tender glances in the direction of Maria Theresa. After watching the young man for a while I came to the conclusion that his love affair was not progressing as rapidly as he desired and that Ramalho was to blame for its troubled course, a guess which I afterward learned to have been founded upon fact.

CHAPTER V

THE BURIAL URN

After luncheon Tom took me into the library, a small square room with one window which opened directly on the garden and could be used as an entrance. Occupying the entire wall to the left of the window was an immense bookcase filled from top to bottom with a heterogeneous collection of objects of virtu, bronzes, mosaics, jades, bits of tapestry, ancient jewelry, vases, pottery, and a variety of other things, which had been thrown in promiscuously with no attempt at classification or even at valuation. I saw at once that I was going to have a stupendous task upon my hands to cull out those objects which would be worthy of exhibition, for it is not always easy to determine the value of curios with whose history one is unacquainted.

The articles we had picked up on our expedition into the interior of Brazil I would know how to classify, and especially was I attracted to the huge funerary urn, large enough to contain an entire human body, which stood partially concealed by the open door. This urn was an old friend, for Tom and I had found it upon an

island which lay in the center of a lake within the confines of the enormous island of Marajó at the mouth of the Amazon River. This inner island was once used as the burial ground of an ancient tribe and from it we had carried away many interesting pieces of pottery, most of which we had presented to the Brazilian Museum.

"Why don't you place the urn in a more effective position?" I inquired as Tom unlocked the glass doors of the bookcase. "It's a shame to hide it behind that door."

"The servants are superstitious about it. If it were on full display this room would never be cleaned," he answered, smiling. "But, come, what do you think of this, eh?"

He held out for my inspection a piece of Indian feather work of marvelous beauty which blended into one harmonious pattern the exquisite pinks and blues and greens of the Brazilian birds.

"I won't have much trouble classifying that," I returned. "But those other things," I waved my hand toward the case, "are practically new to me and will take considerable time to trace to their sources since you were so careless as to lose the data in connection with them."

He spread out his hands deprecatingly in the foreign fashion which was tantamount to saying that what was

done could not be undone and there was no further use in discussing it. So I simply remarked that I would begin at once, and in spite of his remonstrance that there was no particular hurry, I went upstairs for my brief-case. I had lived amidst the hustle and bustle of the world for so long that I had quite lost the habit of never doing to-day what could possibly be put off until to-morrow, a habit which was responsible for converting Tom into the easy-going man he had become.

I don't mean to imply that little or no work is done in this land of languorous heat. The foreigners toil early and late at their respective occupations and the lower classes earn their daily bread as the Lord commanded that man should earn it. It is only the leisure class Brazilians who saunter through life, dabbling in various gentlemen's professions as stepping-stones to political advancement, refusing to be hurried and finding time for the little amenities which we, in our modern rush and scramble after the dollar, so often overlook. I could not blame Tom for having adopted a philosophy which affords one a chance to enjoy the beauty as well as the hard materiality of life.

But I digress.

As I lifted the brief-case from my trunk, the sweet call of a sabia drew me irresistibly, and for a second I stepped out upon the little balcony outside my window to enjoy the fineness of the day. Above me stretched

the dazzling blue of a cloudless sky; beneath me spread the sweet-scented flamboyant garden along whose paths strolled Maria Theresa and her giant admirer. Then from around the corner of the house came Duarte Ramalho. At sight of the two lovers he hurried forward and ordering the girl to return indoors, confronted his American brother-in-law.

"How many times must I tell you," began Ramalho angrily, sawing the air with his hands, "that Maria Theresa is not for you, that I will not have you making love to her—stealing her virginity, perhaps, by your smooth talk."

"You miserable scoundrel!" St. John grasped the little Brazilian's slender shoulder in a huge paw and shook him as easily as he would have a child. "If you so much as hint such a thing to me again, I'll break every bone in your body and be jolly glad I did it, too."

"Neveele!" At Maria Theresa's anguished cry St. John loosed his hold and strode away, whereupon I reentered my room a trifle ashamed of having spied upon what was assuredly none of my business.

That same afternoon Tom received word that he was needed in Sao Paulo on business. He was reluctant to go but the importance of the deal to be put through made it imperative for him to leave at once. He im-

pressed upon me as he bade me good-by that I was not to spend every moment of his absence in the library.

"I shall probably be gone a week. In the meanwhile the house is yours, my dear fellow. Besides, Helena will find the evenings lonely without me. See what you can do toward keeping her happy," were his parting words. "I've half a mind to lock up the library until my return."

Had he been blessed with prophetic vision he would have acted upon that suggestion, and not only locked but sealed as well that room of fateful memory.

I was anxious, however, to finish cataloguing a certain set of very fine and unique bronzes which I had begun upon just before dinner, so after our repast at which I was the only gentleman present, I excused myself to the ladies and returned to the library. When the task was completed, seeing that the evening was still young, I determined to follow Tom's advice and went in search of Dona Helena.

I found her on the second floor in a large airy room furnished in wicker which seemed to be a sewing-room and studio combined. Tom's wife was engaged in a piece of needlework; Maria Theresa was painting the boy, Ricardo, and Judith, lying at ease upon the settee, was reading aloud for their entertainment. My approach had an unprecedented effect upon this picture of amicable home-life. Ricardo ceased to pose; Maria

Theresa hastily covered her canvas, and Judith slipped the book beneath the cushions at her head. Only Dona Helena remained undisturbed. With a smile she invited me to join the circle while her nimble fingers continued their task.

"I did not mean to intrude," I said quickly. "If I am at all in the way I shall be happy to withdraw."

"You need not feel obliged to leave us, Senhor, because two foolish girls act as though they had never seen a gentleman before in all their lives," Dona Helena interposed serenely.

"Helena," pouted Maria Theresa, reproachfully. "I am only an amateur. I did not want the Senhor to smile at my poor attempt."

"Indeed I had no such thought," I reassured her. "I'll consent to remain only upon one condition, that Maria Theresa resume her painting and that the Senhora Ramalho continue her reading," and I bowed to the two young ladies.

The would-be artist obediently set to work once more, but with an amused laugh Judith shook her bright head at me.

"I'm afraid you wouldn't enjoy the book," she said in English. "French novels are not written to be read aloud in company. If you will permit me I'll finish reading it to myself."

I inclined my head and as she buried herself in the

pages of the yellow-backed volume I drew up a chair beside Dona Helena. Before I could find a topic of conversation which I thought might be of interest to my hostess there was the sound of an angry exclamation as with a choking cry Judith flung the book from her. As it clattered to the floor a long, thin-bladed paper-cutter made in the shape of an Indian dagger fell from its opened pages. Rising, I picked up the knife and the book and offered them to Judith Ramalho. With a strange glitter in her eyes she accepted the knife and bent the blade between her slender white fingers. Again I held out the book, but with a gesture of repugnance she waved it aside and rose to her feet.

"Thank you. Excuse my outburst but the author's philosophy suddenly grated on my nerves. The book is rotten to the core like—like—." She closed her teeth upon her quivering lip to keep back the words and a bitter smile hovered for a moment about her mouth as she hurried from the room with quickly filling eyes.

Dona Helena drew a sharp breath. "She is losing her senses, that girl. Soon she will be proclaiming to the world her unhappiness." The musical syllables were uttered more to herself than to me.

To break the awkward pause which followed I said rather inanely, "You understand English, Dona Helena?"

"Yes, I comprehend but do not speak it," she replied. "I know what Judith would have said, but she is a foolish, jealous girl. Duarte is a good husband to her. She does not understand, that is all."

I agreed and changed the subject for I was not interested in Judith's marital problems nor did I particularly care to have a finger in this especial pie, although I might have replied that the different viewpoint of nationality was responsible for the trouble.

During the next few days life ran along smoothly enough with only an occasional flare to warn me that the apparent peace was the ominous calm which precedes a storm. Once I found Maria Theresa in tears after a mutinous interview with Ramalho; and the afternoon of the fifteenth of August (that date is firmly impressed on my memory) I saw through the open library window the gleam of Judith's white dress as she paced the garden in deep converse with her brother. Because Neville St. John had not been near the house since his quarrel with Ramalho on the day of my arrival, I took his presence in the garden to mean one of two things; either he had decided to enlist his sister's aid in furthering his cause with Maria Theresa, or else Judith had reached the end of her endurance and had summoned Neville to advise her. In the latter event the interval of calm was at an end and the storm was due to break at any moment.

When I descended to the lower hall just before dinner I encountered Duarte Ramalho. His face was blanched, his eyes seemed starting from his head, and he was trembling to such a degree that he could hardly stand. Thinking that St. John was responsible for the Brazilian's pitiable condition, I took Ramalho's arm with contemptuous solicitude and helped him to a chair in the library. Then I went into the dining-room to pour him out a glass of port from the decanter on the side-board. When I again approached the door of the library he was bending over something in his hand, but at the sound of my steps on the stone floor he raised toward me such a haggard, terror-filled countenance that I thrust the glass upon him, crying out in alarm,

"Good God, man, what's the matter!"

With trembling fingers he held the glass to his bloodless lips and while he drained the wine I stooped to pick up the object which he had let slip unheedingly to the floor. One horrified glance I bestowed upon it, then dropped it as though it held the plague, for the object was a tiny ivory skull, infinitely old, exquisite, perfect, the very skull which had branded Garcia, the ivory curio that Parrish had claimed meant death to look upon!

"In God's name where did you get this—this invention of the devil's!" I exclaimed aghast.

By what trick of fate had the cursed thing found

its way into Ramalho's hands? And had Parrish anything to do with its appearance?

"Where did you get it?" I repeated more quietly, touching the young man's arm to impress upon his fear-bemused senses that I was speaking to him.

"My wife's brother—gave it to me," he muttered, so low that I had to bend to catch the words. "It is—it means death. My God, I didn't know that he—!" He broke off abruptly and sat staring before him with dilated eyes.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet, exclaiming wildly, "I must go! I must hide!" but he got no further for at this moment Cesario ushered in Parrish and the Contessa di Sforza.

Impetuously Parrish grasped the Brazilian's limp hand. "Duarte," he cried in French. "Duarte, my friend."

"Gilbert!" A radiant smile lightened for a second the terror in the gray face of Ramalho as he embraced Parrish fervently. "My dear friend. It is like old times to meet you again."

Parrish disengaged himself and addressed his fair companion who had been looking on at this fervent exchange of greetings with a faint smile on her beautiful lips, and the very ghost of its mocking reflection in her lustrous eyes.

"Nita, permit me to present——"

"No, no. It is not necessary, Gilbert. Duarte and I are very good friends, is it not so, *mon ami?*" she interrupted, extending her left hand with a regal gesture.

"We met in Paris, Nita and I." Ramalho made the explanation as he raised the hand to his lips with the air of a courtier paying homage to a queen.

It was at this precise moment that Parrish's eye in its circuit of the room discovered me standing patiently by the table. He bowed slightly and took a step toward me.

"How do you do, sir?" he greeted me in an aside. "I trust you will pardon my incivility but I came here expressly to have a few words in private with Senhor Ramalho and I have not much time to spare."

"The room is at your service, Mr. Parrish," I replied, stiffly. I paused long enough to bow to the countess, who gave me in return her most charming smile, then I made a dignified exit through the window.

In the garden I wandered about until dinner-time trying to piece together satisfactorily this puzzle upon which I had accidentally stumbled. Was Parrish guilty or was it mere coincidence that he had called upon the heels of the skull's appearance in this house? Was it the same skull which I was firmly convinced, despite his protest, he had taken from me on shipboard? Or had my eyes deceived me and two such skulls were in

existence? And what had Ramalho meant when he declared that St. John had given him the curio?

I could find no plausible answers for these questions since I could not conceive how St. John had managed to come into possession of the ivory skull, and I began to wonder with no little apprehension, recalling a certain tragedy in New York, just what was happening in the library. Then I laughed aloud at my foolish fears. Parrish, whatever his intentions, was hardly likely to harm Ramalho in the presence of a third person and that one a lady. I was hypersensitive to become alarmed over a friendly conference. Doubtless Parrish was in ignorance that the skull had turned up again.

When we sat down to table Ramalho honored us with his presence for the first time in many nights. I noted with relief that Parrish's visit, far from having any ill effects, had, on the contrary, done Ramalho good. He was actually smiling and had regained much of his lost color and composure.

After dinner at Dona Helena's invitation we repaired to the drawing-room instead of the studio; that is, all of us but Judith and her husband, who continued down the hall to their room. If you recall, the drawing-room was on the second floor and a little to the right of the stairs. Thus it happened that Maria Theresa had barely begun a masterly rendition of one of Chopin's Nocturnes (I never could tell one from the other) when

the violent opening of a door hurled toward us the voice of Judith, shrill and tense, crashing discordantly amid the tender notes of the piano.

"I don't understand? Oh, yes, I do, unfortunately only too well. But I won't submit a moment longer. I'm tired of living here, tired of being dependent on the Clintons' bounty while you spend your money on that creature. I——"

A sudden breaking in of Ramalho's voice too low to catch, then a wild laugh from Judith shattered the ensuing silence.

"You needn't be afraid," she sneered. "I won't stop you." Then, passionately, "Go—go to her. I shan't beg you to stay, Duarte. I hate you, hate you. Jimmy was right. I should never have married you. Oh, how I wish you were dead, then I'd have my chance to live my life again free of you!"

There was the sound of Ramalho's steps across the hall and down the stairs, followed by uncontrollable sobbing from Judith's room.

"Maria Theresa!" Dona Helena was the first to recover from the stupor into which the quarrel had thrown us. She spoke with unusual sharpness. "Take Ricardo to his schoolroom and stay there with him until your bedtime."

She waited until the young girl and the boy had obeyed the command and we heard the door of the

schoolroom close behind them, then she addressed herself to me.

"Has Judith gone mad, think you, that she talks so loud for the servants to hear? I wish Tom were home. He knows how to manage her. I confess I don't understand her attitude at all."

"Is that so very surprising, Dona Helena?" I responded gently. I was more touched than I cared to confess by Judith's plight. "You are happily married, whereas Judith—" I left it for her to complete the sentence.

"But that is just what I don't understand. Why is she unhappy?" questioned Tom's wife in a puzzled tone. "Because Duarte goes out and leaves her at home is no reason why she should weep and wail and carry on. It is the wife's place to stay at home, is it not, Senhor?"

"Not in the United States, and Judith, you must remember, looks at life from a different point of view. She is young and she wants a good time. She is proud and she loathes the thought of her husband's dependence upon another man."

"But that is so foolish, Senhor. Duarte is still finding his place in the world. We are pleased to help him, just as he would help us if the tables should ever be turned," she insisted.

"I know," I continued patiently, trying to reconcile

two diametrically opposing aspects of the marriage question. "But Judith has not lived here long enough to have acquired the philosophy necessary to a complete immolation of self upon the altar of matrimony."

"Perhaps you are right." Dona Helena rose as if weary of the subject and going to the window called me to her side. "It's a glorious night, Senhor."

"Perfect," I agreed.

Together we stood upon the little balcony and looked out over the bay, brightly lighted by the dazzling illumination of the many thousands of lamps that line the curving shores. Faintly afar came the strident whistle of a ferryboat, answered softly by the gentle murmur of the waves that lapped against the breakwater. Toward the horizon the forts stood out in bas-relief, big, black hulks rising from the shimmering, moonlit surface of the bay. And all around towered the mountains, queer, irregular shapes that lifted their summits to the skies, where the stars twinkled faintly, even the far-famed Southern Cross put to shame by the splendor of this city of the tropics.

Together we stood and worshiped in silence the beauty of the night, five minutes, ten minutes, how long I do not know, when suddenly we were startled by a crash; and a cry, shrill, intense, the cry of a soul in mortal fear rang through the house.

A moment Dona Helena and I remained frozen by

the horror of that sound. The next instant we were tumbling down the stairs. At the bottom we were met by Judith. Her face was chalky, her eyes terror-filled.

"The urn!" she cried out, throwing herself into Dona Helena's arms.

I dashed into the library and made for the urn, expecting I know not what, then I reeled back against the table and closed my eyes to shut out the terrible spectacle they had encountered. On the floor lay the shattered cover of the urn and inside the receptacle, like a bale of goods, was the crumpled, lifeless body of Duarte Ramalho!

CHAPTER VI

THE OFFICIAL INQUIRY

I was so stunned by the horrible discovery that I had just made that I remained supporting myself against the table in a sort of daze, deprived entirely of the power of coherent thought. What a terrible thing to have happened in this home where I was a guest, I kept repeating over and over in witless fashion. No wonder Judith— Here the realization that the ladies, Dona Helena particularly, might come in at any moment, woke me to the exigencies of the situation. I pulled myself together, waited long enough to compose my features that they might not mirror the horror that I felt, then I hastened back into the hall.

Judith was still sobbing but more gently. As I advanced toward her Dona Helena raised a questioning glance.

"What is it?" she asked fearfully. "I can get nothing from Judith except shudders and moans."

"Help me get her upstairs and then I'll tell you," I replied as calmly as I was able. I wanted to get as far as possible from the scene of the tragedy before

I broke the news, a difficult task at best and one from which I shrank with every fiber of my being.

When we had aided Judith up the stairs and along the hall to her room (she walked like one in a dream from whom all consciousness of present surroundings has vanished), I spoke to Dona Helena.

"If you will come into the studio after making Judith comfortable, I——"

It was fortunate that she understood and nodded assent before I had finished speaking. I could not have added another word. Then I went to my room and poured myself a brandy neat. I felt the need of something to steady my nerves, for though Ramalho was nothing to me, yet the strange manner of his death had shaken me considerably.

When Dona Helena finally entered the studio and I saw how apprehensive she seemed, I came to the conclusion that the greatest kindness I could do her was to end the terrible suspense she was laboring under. Compassionately I took her plump little hand in both my own as I told her the truth. At first she stared back at me uncomprehendingly, then as the full meaning of my words dawned upon her, with a piteous cry she broke from me and ran quickly down the hall. In a moment I was after her, barring her progress as she tried to descend the stairs.

"Dona Helena," I said sternly. "You can do no

good down there," and I pointed in the direction of the library. "If Tom were here he would say that your place was with Judith. Come, be brave," I urged more gently. "Remember that the others depend upon you for moral support."

Slowly she went down on her knees and made the sign of the cross. "God have mercy on his soul," she breathed, and I bent my head as she murmured a prayer.

In the solemn silence that followed she rose. With a catch in her voice she said resolutely, "I am going to Judith. You will do all that is necessary, Senhor?"

I raised her fingers to my lips as a tribute to her courage. "I will serve you to the best of my ability, Dona Helena," I replied simply.

I descended the stairs and calling to Cesario I sent him for the nearest doctor. In a trice he was back again and I noted, without really being conscious of doing so, how terrified the butler looked and how quickly he scuttled away to the back part of the house. Then I shook hands with Doctor Gomez, to whom I took a decided fancy. He was a nervous, quick-spoken little man, had been educated in Europe, and was considered a brilliant physician. He listened to my explanation of the tragedy with his head on one side and his bright eyes cocked on my face in birdlike fashion. He reminded me of a pert robin, for he was

not unlike that feathered songster in his build. Though he nodded his head several times and raised his eyebrows interrogatively at every third syllable of mine he made no comment until I proposed that he view the body of Ramalho.

Quickly he raised his hands in protest. "No, Senhor, I cannot do that," he disclaimed. "I cannot examine the body without the permission of the police. That would be contrary to regulations. You have sent for them, of course, Senhor—? I beg your pardon, I have not heard you mention your name."

"Professor Anthony Potter, at your service, Doctor."

"An American, eh? So, so. That would account for your sending for me," he murmured. "They do things differently in the United States, eh? Did you say you had notified the police?"

"No, I have not, but I would be obliged if you would do so, Doctor."

"Certainly, certainly." He hopped to the phone and after what seemed an interminable interval of hurried speech and wild gesticulation on his part, he returned to me with a satisfied smile.

"The *delegado* will be here presently," he said, picking up his hat and bag. "He will bring his own physician, which would make my presence superfluous. I am delighted to have had the chance to meet you, Senhor Potter."

He held out his hand, which I shook warmly. "I return the compliment, Doctor," I responded, "and tender my apologies for having called you in needlessly."

"Not at all, not at all. I am honored to have been able to serve you." He was not to be outdone in courtesy to me. "Just a word. When the *delegado* comes, give him the house. If you do not interfere he will not trouble you overlong."

I thanked the doctor for his timely hint, and while I waited for the arrival of the police, I suddenly determined to have another look at the scene of the crime. By this time that first feeling of horror had worn off and the brandy had restored to me my lost equanimity. Also to an archæologist death of itself holds no great terrors, since he will despoil a tomb or rob the ancient dead with absolutely no qualms of conscience.

I entered the library with the full determination to discover whether the ivory skull had played any part in the death of Ramalho, but at the crucial moment my sang-froid deserted me. I could not bring myself to look again into the urn at that huddled figure. He had not been dead long enough to have lost his claim upon my humanity. So I contented myself with a systematic hunt for the ivory skull itself. But though I looked everywhere, not a sign of the little curio could I find. Had Parrish carried it away with him upon his visit to Ramalho, or had he reclaimed it when he committed

the murder? I paused abruptly near the table as the question surged through my mind. Then I asked myself severely what right I had to believe Parrish guilty. Was it because the skull and that other murder suggested his name to me? He had been proved innocent on the former occasion, why deem him guilty now? Could no one else then have desired Ramalho's death?

At once there flashed across my brain St. John's threat and Judith's vehement wish less than an hour before. Could it possibly be—? Here I glanced down at the table, then bent closer to examine the weapon which lay there before me. Imagine my feelings to discover that it was the very Indian paper-cutter that I myself had returned to Judith on the night of my arrival and that the hilt bore evidences of a smear which could only have been made by blood! And Neville St. John had given Ramalho the skull!

Could Judith's presence in the library be accounted for in the light of this revelation? Had hers been the arm that wielded the dagger? Then I shook my head. She was hardly strong enough to have placed the body in the urn, yet she had known it was there. What part, then, had St. John played in the tragedy? And what was the real significance of the skull?

By the time the police arrived my brains were in a sadly muddled state. I realized that I was not cut out

to be a detective and I turned the matter over to the *delegado* with obvious relief.

The *delegado,* who was not only captain of his precinct but a civil magistrate as well, was a tall, thin man with a hooked nose and bald head, a man of superior education, alert, courteous, and obliging. He bowed to me with ceremonious politeness when I invited him in and he entered the house with a rapid stride, followed by his entourage, a fat, white-haired medico, and a wizened, bespectacled scribe in rusty black. Behind them came the uniformed police, whom the *delegado* immediately dispatched to round up the household that he might take their depositions of the affair.

Then he called his physician to his side, and the two, conversing earnestly in low tones, approached the library while I followed in their wake. I was eager to learn the doctor's verdict, but to my disappointment the *delegado* assured me with genuine regret that the examination of the body and the room must be conducted in strict privacy.

Bowing to his superior authority, I ascended the stairs to the drawing-room, where the family had been assembled to await the police's pleasure. I found a seat near one of the windows, then took a hasty survey of the other occupants of the room. Maria Theresa was sobbing audibly with her head buried in the sofa cushions, and Tom's wife was weeping gently as she

held her son convulsively to her. Only Judith, in a pink negligee with her golden hair hanging down her back, was dry-eyed as she stared fixedly before her, for even the servants were sniveling as they huddled together near the door. Altogether it was a far from cheerful gathering and I, for one, was glad when the *delegado* appeared.

The inquiry was conducted in the same manner that a coroner's inquest is held in the United States, with the exception that there is no jury and that the scribe notes down in long-hand the testimony of the various witnesses and any questions which the *delegado* may see fit to ask.

The cook, Esmeralda, an enormous negress, and the maid, Rosa, a pretty quadroon, had not been in the house at the time of the murder and had nothing to relate. They were, therefore, dismissed and they shuffled hastily down the hall to the back stairs as though elated to get off so cheaply.

Cesario, with trembling lips and blanched face, related that he had been in the kitchen when he heard the cry, and that it had terrified him to such a degree that he had run into the butler's pantry and hidden himself in the closet, only daring to venture forth when I summoned him to call Doctor Gomez.

I knew that the fellow was lying, for I recalled that it was the sight of him in the hall that had made me

send him for the doctor instead of telephoning, as I should have done had I believed myself alone. Feeling that it was my duty to be of as much service as I could under the circumstances, I addressed the *delegado* and explained what I knew. Whereupon he thanked me courteously and told me that any remarks which I desired to make concerning any of the testimony would be listened to with pleasure when he took my deposition. After which polite rebuke I subsided and watched the proceedings in silence.

Seeing that he had been caught in a lie, Cesario retracted and stated that he had hidden in the closet but that presently, courage returning, he had ventured into the hall just as I descended the stairs. Whether the *delegado* believed this amended testimony or not I could not tell. His face remained impassive as he dismissed the butler.

Dona Helena was called upon next. She related quietly how we had adjourned to the drawing-room and how after hearing the cry we had discovered her brother's body in the urn. Of Judith's quarrel with Ramalho and her presence in the room of death Dona Helena made no mention, and I determined to follow her lead.

Maria Theresa, red-eyed and frightened, and the boy, Ricardo, had nothing further to add to this testimony and at Dona Helena's request the *delegado* per-

mitted her to conduct them from the room. Thus there remained only Judith and myself to be questioned.

The *delegado* turned to Judith and spoke very gently. "Senhora Ramalho," he said, inclining his head, "very often a wife can give us a hint as regards her husband that sisters and brothers cannot. So far we have learned nothing. Can you add anything further to the statements already made?"

For a considerable while Judith continued to stare unseeingly into space as she twisted her hands nervously in her lap, for so considerable a time that I grew impatient and curbed with difficulty the desire to urge her to reply. I wondered at the *delegado's* calmness as he quietly and unhurryingly awaited her answer. At length she turned toward him and spoke in a hard, dry voice.

"I can add nothing to what has been said," came with difficulty from her lips.

"This dagger, for instance?" the official persisted. "We want it identified as it is the weapon which caused your husband's death."

When he began to speak Judith's face had gone as white as death and now she flung out a protesting hand.

"No, no, no," she cried, shrilly.

The *delegado* raised his brows. "So you do identify this dagger?" he inquired.

He held the weapon toward her by its blade and with

a decided effort she wrenched her eyes away from her fascinated contemplation of it.

"No, I can't identify it. But what am I saying?" She laughed hysterically. "Of course I know it. It is —it belonged to Duarte." She passed her hand across her brow in a dazed way, then cried despairingly, "Please let me go. I—I can't stand any more."

The *delegado* rose and escorted her to the door, then he came back to me with a peculiar smile about his thin lips.

"They are all alike, the women," he said with a shrug. "No matter what their nationality, the moment something happens they're off in hysterics. And, now, Senhor, I should like to hear your version of this crime."

My version of the crime indeed, thought I. What was I going to say when the ladies had robbed me of all right to be veracious? I repeated in substance what Dona Helena had told him, and then a sudden idea flashed like lightning across my mind. Why not relate to him the events connected with the murder of Benjamin Garcia, the ivory skull, and Parrish's acquaintance with both the murdered men?

"Senhor *Delegado*," I remarked as he was making preparations to return to the library, "if you can spare me a few minutes I believe I can tell you of certain things which happened to-day which may have a bear-

ing upon this murder you are investigating. If the Senhor will be seated," I added, as he indicated his willingness to listen, "the story is rather long for it begins as far back as a month ago in New York City."

Gravely with no apparent curiosity visible upon his serious countenance, he resumed his chair while I launched into an account of all the facts that I have related elsewhere.

"And this skull, this bit of ivory, where is it now?" he asked when I had completed my tale.

"I do not know," I answered, "unless it is concealed on the person of the dead man."

"Impossible. I myself searched the body. There was no such skull upon him. In fact, he had been robbed of all his valuables; his rings, his studs, his watch, all have vanished."

"Robbed!" I was astounded. "But Parrish, if he proves to be the murderer, would hardly rob him!"

"As a blind, Senhor?"

"Perhaps," I replied dubiously, then I brightened. "There is no doubt that he would take the skull."

The *delegado* nodded. "Let us return downstairs and see what my physician can tell us further in regard to this matter. I left him to examine the body with greater care after he had assured me that this was the dagger used in the commission of the crime."

In silence we descended the stairs and crossed the hall to the library where the doctor rose to meet us and pointed dramatically to the body of Ramalho, which now lay upon the floor.

On his face was a look such as is only seen on the countenances of the damned; and on his chest, seared into the flesh by the action of some powerful chemical, was the imprint of a tiny human skull!

CHAPTER VII

AN EMINENT DETECTIVE

THE next morning Tom returned, and having heard all that I could tell him, he assumed at once entire responsibility and undertook to see that the *delegado's* orders were carried out. As for myself I returned to my task of cataloguing curiosities though not with the same enthusiasm which I had previously brought to bear upon the subject. My mind persisted in reverting to the mystery of Ramalho's death, and I found myself continually wondering whether I had done right to cast suspicion upon Parrish.

That evening Tom entered the library and sitting down beside me shook his head in dismal fashion. Compassionately I noted how gray and flabby his face had become and how heavily he walked as though all the sunshine and joy had been suddenly removed from his world.

"It's a damnable business," he said slowly, "a damnable business. And the worst of it is that I believe that Judith is mixed up in it in some way. That dagger, Tony, was not Duarte's."

"Whose then, Tom?" I asked, aghast, pushing my notebook from me and giving him my undivided attention.

"Originally it belonged to Neville, but I think he either gave it or loaned it to Judith the last time he was here," answered Tom wearily. "In any event she had it last and she wanted him dead——"

"No, Tom, I won't believe that she killed him. She's an excitable, high-tempered girl, and people often say things they don't mean at all when they are roused," I pointed out. "I can't imagine any woman having the courage to put the body into the urn. I'd be more inclined to think that Neville did it."

Tom shifted impatiently. "Then there is Helena. When I think that perhaps she——"

"Tom!" I exclaimed. "What are you saying? She was with me——"

"Good gracious, man, I'm not insinuating that she killed him," he interrupted curtly.

"Then what?"

Tom lifted his hands despairingly. "I wish I knew, Tony. When I mentioned what you told me about Duarte's receiving that skull she almost fainted from terror and begged me on her knees to drop the matter. If I meddled some dire calamity would befall us. That is all I can get out of her." He turned a pair of haggard eyes upon me. "Tony, I can't stand it. I've got to

know what Helena has to do with this thing. If there were only some way to get to the bottom of the matter."

"The police——"

He negatived the suggestion. "They're all alike the world over. They'll spend their time hunting for Parrish and when he is tried and cleared, for it's my opinion he didn't have a thing to do with it, why the police will drop the matter just as the New York police dropped the affair of Garcia."

There was a pause and then Tom banged his fist on the table emphatically. "Tony, I'm going to see this thing through to the end. I am not going to allow a murder to be committed in my house and permit the murderer to go scotfree. I am going to clear up this affair somehow. I intend to employ a detective and I only wish I knew of one sufficiently renowned to send for him. I don't care who he is or how far I have to go to get him, so long as he'll guarantee to solve this mystery for me."

"You won't have to go far afield, Tom. There's an eminent detective right within call and he's an American, to boot."

I fished into the scrap basket and pulled out the *Jornal do Commercio*. Marking a paragraph which I had noted casually in my perusal of the paper after luncheon, I handed it to Tom. He took it from me,

fumbled in his pockets, declared he had left his reading glasses upstairs, and returned the paper to me.

"Read it, Tony," he commanded. "Let's hear what the *Jornal* has to say for an American detective."

I complied with the request.

"We take great pleasure in announcing to the public the presence in our city of one of the foremost investigators of crime that the world has known, Senhor Graydon McKelvie of New York," I read. "In his interview with the gentlemen of the press, however, Senhor McKelvie was careful to make the distinction that he is interested in the solution of a crime merely as a hobby and not as a profession, and only in those instances which appeared to him to warrant the expenditure of his powers upon them. He is a guest of Antonio Diago, the distinguished head of the Metropolitan Police."

"A hobbyist," exclaimed Tom in disgust as I put down the paper. "I want a detective."

"What's the difference what he calls himself as long as he solves the problem," I retorted.

"If he is so particular will he be likely to consider our case?" continued Tom, gloomily.

"There is no harm in asking him, Tom. Besides it would be a pity to pass up an opportunity ready made for us. I never believe in throwing back into their teeth a gift of the gods."

"Perhaps you're right. We'll call on this gentleman in the morning."

"Why not now, Tom?"

"My dear Tony, will you never learn that the evenings were designed for pleasure and not for business?" he replied a little wearily.

The following morning directly after breakfast Tom phoned for his chauffeur and we drove around the Beira Mar to the Praia Botafogo where the chief of police dwelt in a beautiful pink house that looked like a mammoth birthday cake set in a garland of ferns. We were admitted to the reception-room on the first floor and while we awaited McKelvie's presence Tom moved restlessly about the big room unable to take his mind from his own troubles and admire with me the rare paintings with which the wall was hung. After some five minutes he spoke abruptly:

"What is he like, this man?" he inquired.

"I don't know," I returned absent-mindedly, trying to decide whether the picture before me was a genuine Turner.

"Is he old or young? For mercy's sake, Tony, pay attention to what I'm saying," Tom exclaimed irritably, perching upon the extreme edge of a high-back walnut chair.

"I don't know a thing about him," I replied patiently, "except that I have heard the name mentioned once or

twice in connection with some mysterious crime which he had satisfactorily solved, from which I should judge that he can't be so very young."

Mentally I prayed that he would take the case for if one night of torturing anxiety could turn Tom from a genial fellow into a bear, it was time that something serious was done about the matter. Being practically an outsider and a fairly self-centered person I failed to grasp the fact that Tom would naturally be affected by the tragic death of a member of his family.

The sound of steps in the hall caused us both to look expectantly toward the door, for I was as curious as Tom to meet this man upon whom we had determined to pin our hopes. My first glance was one of decided disappointment. From his reputation and the egotistical tone of the write up I had judged him to be middle-aged, and probably overbearing. The man who came toward us inquiringly was young, about thirty, a pleasant every-day sort of person whose only claim to distinction lay in the determined set of his jaw and in the brilliance of his black eyes, eyes so keen as to give one the uncanny impression that one's inmost thoughts lay revealed to their gaze. But the moment he asked what he could do for us I forgot my disappointment. The rich, mellow voice, deep and clear as a bell, held assurance of power and a promise that he was the one man to help us in our need. How to interest him sufficiently

in our case to secure his aid was the task that I now took upon myself at Tom's request and a harder one I have not encountered this many a long day.

He listened courteously enough, for he was always the gentleman, to my somewhat involved and lengthy explanation, but when I was through I realized that I had failed in my attempt and that my story had made no very great impression upon him. In his eyes it was as commonplace as a reproduction of a genuine masterpiece would be in mine.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," he remarked, rising to indicate that we had trespassed longer than good manners allowed upon his patience, "but at present I am on my vacation and I am not overanxious to exert myself unless it be in the way of amusement."

"My dear sir," I hastened to point out, "for you a case of this sort would come under the head of amusement."

"Professor Potter honors me beyond my meed," he retorted, bowing low. Then dropping his railing manner he added with a tone of finality in his flexible voice, "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I cannot take the case."

"Don't say that, Mr. McKelvie," begged Tom, desperately. He had been listening to our colloquy with his head bowed in his hands as if our conversation had no possible interest for him, but now he got to his

feet, suddenly alive to the necessity of making this very cool and distant young man realize that in him alone lay our hope of securing a solution to the mystery surrounding Ramalho's death. "If you only knew how the uncertainty, how the horrible thought that even my wife may be mixed up in this murder in some way, is driving me frantic you would in mercy give me your aid."

"Mr. Clinton," responded McKelvie, letting his keen eyes rest a moment on Tom's haggard face, "when you appeal to my humanity I am tempted to say yes. But unfortunately my hands are tied. I cannot take the case."

"Think of the glory, the prestige that will be yours," I interjected, hoping to touch his vanity. "The press will acclaim you from one end of the country to the other."

The scornful curl of his lip, the sudden flash of fire from his eye were sufficient evidence that he cared nothing for fame, or glory, or anything else of that nature which I might have enumerated.

"Professor Potter judges me by himself, perhaps?" he inquired cuttingly, then continued sternly: "Sir, do you think I care a snap of my fingers for the world's opinion of me? If I would not take the case in mercy to Mr. Clinton, do you think I would stoop to take it

for the petty, sordid reasons you have tried to flatter me with?"

He turned from me to Tom and spoke less vehemently, "Mr. Clinton, I would take the case if I could. I am a guest of the Chief of Police. As he has made no mention whatsoever of the matter to me, I cannot under the circumstances attempt to solve this mystery over the heads of the men to whom he has intrusted its solution."

"I know Diago personally," declared Tom with the eagerness of a boy. "If I gain his consent to put you on the case will you help us, Mr. McKelvie?"

McKelvie inclined his dark head. "I shall be only too glad to be of service to you," he responded amiably. "If you will wait just a moment while I get my hat I'll drive to police headquarters with you."

At the door he paused and caught my eye. "To the greater glory of the name, McKelvie," he said satirically.

"To its greater glory," I responded, saluting him.

He came back and held out his hand. "You're a good sport, Professor," he remarked with a humorous twinkle, as I accepted the olive branch.

The Central police station was situated in the heart of the city and as we drove inland passing rapidly from one street to another we were unusually silent, simply because Tom was engrossed in his own thoughts and

McKelvie hinted politely that he preferred to study the surrounding scenery. To keep myself from theorizing about a case of which I knew so very little I amused myself by watching the impassive face of my new acquaintance, wondering what was going on in the brain behind those eyes that darted lightninglike from one object to another along the streets, thinking that perhaps his attitude was merely a pose.

"What do you think of him, Professor Potter?" McKelvie inquired suddenly.

I blinked stupidly. "Think of whom?" I asked.

"Genus homo, species McKelvie," he responded with an amused laugh.

I reddened uncomfortably not knowing exactly how to retort. Before I could gather my wits he added, "You needn't trouble to expound. You have an ingenuous countenance, Professor, and my eyesight happens to be particularly good. You want to learn the art of concealing your thoughts, to wear ever as I do a sphinxlike expression."

"It is unfortunate that we are not all as blessed as yourself in the latter regard," I returned tartly, annoyed by his egotism.

He lifted his brows and shook his head. "You really shouldn't try it," he said slowly. "It hardly becomes your gray hairs and dignified appearance, Professor.

Besides I am apt to cavil at sarcasm. My prerogative entirely you must understand."

The twinkle in his eyes robbed the words of any offense and I smiled in spite of myself.

"Something tells me that we shall part friends after all, Professor," he assured me gravely as we stopped before Police Headquarters and such was the charm of his personality that I agreed with the impudent beggar on the spot.

CHAPTER VIII

BY PERMISSION OF THE CHIEF

We were ushered immediately into the presence of Antonio Diago, who rose from behind his desk to greet us with a pleasant smile and extended hands. After my introduction to him he waved us to chairs and drawing from his pocket his gold cigarette case offered it to us. When Tom declined Diago pushed over a box of cigars, then reseating himself at his desk, asked us what he could do for us.

While Tom was explaining the circumstances I took stock of this man who was nominally, though not virtually since his position was a political one and he was more or less of a figurehead, although nothing could be done without his consent and approval—nominally responsible for the policing of this city whose inhabitants were of many diverse nationalities and all more or less of inflammable temperaments. A stranger who did not know his profession would have taken him for a member of the diplomatic corps rather than of the police force. His imposing bearing, his polished manners, the air of distinction loaned to his ascetic face by

his gray hair and neatly trimmed imperial, proclaimed him the type of man that any nation would be proud to send as her representative to a foreign country. In fact, if I remember correctly, he had served Brazil in that capacity at the Court of St. James not so very many years before so that I was not greatly surprised to discover that he spoke English with a fluency and flawlessness that put to shame my own attempts to express myself concisely in my native tongue.

As McKelvie did not understand Portuguese the interview was conducted in English, and at the conclusion of Tom's narrative Diago turned to his guest. "A thousand apologies, my friend. I did not suggest that you take the case because you gave me to understand that you were bored with mysteries and desired nothing better than to be allowed to forget their very existence."

McKelvie lifted slender shoulders. "Such was my hope but— You know my inability to resist an appeal."

The hint of a smile played about the chief's firm lips as he replied: "Will it afford you pleasure then to solve this mystery for Mr. Clinton?"

"Both pleasure and profit," answered McKelvie with a side glance at me. "But I do not wish to deprive your subordinates of the glory of solving the case for themselves."

"Tut, they will be delighted to share with you any

honors that are forthcoming and be most happy to assist you in any way that lies within their power," Diago assured him warmly.

"Thank you, Chief. I will not interfere with your men and when I reach a solution they are entirely welcome to the credit," was the young man's disinterested reply.

He was an anomaly, this man, egotistically proud of his ability, yet at the same time callously indifferent to worldly applause.

The Chief bowed. "If there is anything I can do to serve you—" he hinted.

"I should like to interview the *delegado* and his physician," interposed McKelvie crisply, assuming command of the situation.

Diago took a card from his desk, inscribed on it the words, "By permission of the Chief," and handed it to McKelvie. Then he bade us "Good luck" and saw us to the door.

When we were once more in the machine Tom broke the silence that had descended upon us.

"I'll drop you two at the precinct," he said, "and send the car back for you. I do not like leaving Helena alone so long. If you can get along without me——"

"Certainly. Professor Potter will be able to furnish any information that I may require," responded McKelvie, smiling.

At the precinct the *delegado* overwhelmed us with kindness. But, certainly he was delighted to have such a distinguished colleague working with him, anything McKelvie desired to know he would gladly find out for him. He would hold himself completely at our orders, and a good deal more in the same strain which I translated for McKelvie's benefit.

"Ask him if he understands English," was McKelvie's first command, but unfortunately the *delegado* was acquainted only with his own tongue.

"What a deuced awkward predicament," murmured McKelvie, then to me, "Find out what evidence he collected from the scene of the crime."

The balance of the conversation was carried on with me as the mouthpiece, not an easy task since they kept me jumping from one language to the other. For the sake of clearness and brevity I shall record the interview as though it had been conducted solely between the two principals.

In answer to McKelvie's first query the *delegado* produced the dagger which he handed to the young man with the remark, "We found this weapon on the table in the library. As perhaps you will notice there is a smear of blood on the hilt but unfortunately it is not a finger-print. Do you not agree with me, Senhor?"

The police officer set his eyes on McKelvie's face with all the anxiety of a pupil who awaits the approba-

tion of his master, and his hawklike countenance fairly beamed with pride when McKelvie concurred in the opinion that the smear was not a finger-print although it bore close resemblance to one in general shape and size.

"That implies premeditation, of course," McKelvie muttered, continuing to examine the hilt through half-closed lids, "which gives the case a more serious aspect."

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

"Don't you think so?"

"How should I know? I'm not versed in such matters."

"Use your powers of reasoning, man. Here's a person killed by a dagger whose handle is innocent of finger-prints. The murderer was hardly likely to have held the weapon in his teeth, therefore he must have worn gloves, a conclusion borne out by the smear which is really a print without the identifying whorls. If he took the precaution to wear gloves, he must have come prepared to commit murder," explained McKelvie tersely. He turned to the *delegado*. "Anything else of interest?"

The official shook his head. "The window was open and so was the door as far as I could learn. That is all the evidence I have except that the dead man's belongings had been taken. His watch, his diamond

studs, and his ring are gone. Also the skull of which Professor Potter spoke is missing, therefore robbery may have been purely a blind. At least I am inclined to believe so."

"Very possibly. To whom does the dagger belong?"

"To Ramalho. Of course it is not good manners to doubt a lady's word," he continued with a deprecating smile, "but I gathered the impression that the dagger did not belong to her husband even though she claimed that it did."

McKelvie raised his brows. "So. And what did you reason from that fact, Senhor?"

The *delegado* shrugged and spread out his hands. "When a lady lies about the weapon that was used to kill her husband what does one deduce but a former lover, eh?"

McKelvie disagreed. "My dear sir, never try to gauge a woman's actions by the same standards that you would use to measure a man's. Perhaps you are right and she has a former lover. Again she may have been shielding her brother. Still again she may have been frightened and meant nothing at all by her contradictory statements. I shall have to study her character first before I can judge rightly what her actions may or may not have meant. That is all, then?"

"That is all except that my men are hunting for this

man, Gilbert Parrish. Who knows but what I may be right and he turns out to be the lover, eh?"

This time it was I that contradicted him. "Judith doesn't even know of Parrish's existence," I declared.

"Did she tell you so?" inquired McKelvie bluntly.

"Why, no," I was forced to confess. "But he seemed on such good terms with Ramalho."

"And you think a former lover would be more inimical?" McKelvie's keen eyes wore an amused expression as he spoke.

"I'm no authority on the ways and manners of lovers," I retorted peevishly.

McKelvie put a hand on my shoulder. "I shouldn't be at all surprised if you were right, Professor. And now, Senhor *Delegado,* since our car has returned I shall be obliged if you will give me the address of your physician."

"Certainly, certainly." He stepped to the door with us, gave the chauffeur his instructions, shook hands with us cordially and begged us to remember that he was entirely at our service.

"Nice chap," commented McKelvie as we drove toward the Carioca. "They are very obliging, these police, but not so energetic as our own. He does not seem to have made much effort toward following up the clue of the dagger."

"Ladies, especially one of Judith's standing, are

sacrosanct," I reminded him. "One is not supposed to question their word."

"Is one supposed also to be struck blind and deaf in their presence?" he asked caustically. "There are more ways than one of skinning a cat, you know. By the way, to whom does the dagger belong?"

I hesitated. He took me up abruptly. "If it is your purpose to withhold any evidence you may possess and which has any bearing whatsoever on the tragedy, I shall wash my hands of the affair right now. I am willing to do my best to satisfy your friend, but I'll be hanged if I'll submit to being handicapped by you, Professor."

I smiled tolerantly at his outburst. The shoe was on the other foot now.

"I had no intention of withholding evidence," I returned calmly. "But, naturally, I don't want to be the one responsible for casting suspicion upon the girl."

"No one will accuse you of such a motive, Professor," he returned in a lighter vein. "But be careful. Women are dangerous creatures to meddle with at any time."

"Aren't you rather young to be a misogynist?" I asked in an endeavor to side-track him.

He laughed. "No man is too young for that. With me, however, it's a matter of self-protection. I like to be free to pick up and light out for parts unknown at will and what should I do with a wife in that event?

But we are wandering far afield. To whom does the dagger belong?"

"According to Tom it belongs to Judith, given or loaned to her by her brother, Neville," I explained reluctantly. "But how you guessed that I knew anything about it is more than I can fathom."

"It was not guess-work, Professor. I told you before that you had better learn to control your facial expressions," he replied. "When the *delegado* claimed that the dagger belonged to a former lover I saw your unconscious smile of superiority for his ignorance as you translated for my benefit. That told me all I needed to know, that and the way you expressed yourself. You said, 'The *delegado* thinks that the dagger belonged to a former lover,' implying that you yourself knew quite differently."

"I don't think there is much chance of my handicapping you," was my comment as we stopped before the building where Doctor Penna had his office.

We ascended in the elevator to the third floor where we were admitted at once into the doctor's private office, a room filled with all kinds of curious reminders of cases in which he had been involved in his capacity as police physician. As in the case of the *delegado,* the chief's card rendered the fat medico only too anxious to be of service, and fortunately for me, we soon discovered that he was acquainted with the English lan-

guage which he spoke if not as fluently as Diago at least well enough to be understood.

"You have quite an interesting museum here, Doctor," said McKelvie with a pleasant smile as soon as we were seated and the doctor had resumed his cigarette without which no Brazilian feels at ease.

Penna's florid face shone with pleasure. "Yes, mementos of former cases. Come in sometime and I'll be glad to tell you something of their history."

"Thank you, Doctor. At present my interest lies in your latest connection with a crime. I understand that you made a post-mortem examination of the body of Ramalho. What was the cause of death?"

In view of the fact that both the *delegado* and myself had told McKelvie how Ramalho had died, this last question might seem superfluous, yet in reality it showed how very keen-witted this young man was and how well he was able to read character. Intuitively he had discerned what Gomez had told me; namely, that Brazilian police officials are most obliging when their authority is deferred to. And of course the doctor was presumably the person to whom to apply for information as to the exact cause which had resulted in death.

The effect on the white-haired medico was magical. Eagerly the words poured from his lips as he told us all he had learned concerning the murder. In five min-

utes we had secured more information than we could have done by a day's officious questioning.

Ramalho had been stabbed through the heart and had died instantly, some twenty minutes previous to my entrance into the room and not more than three-quarters of an hour before the arrival of the police. The doctor had examined the dagger and measured the wound and could state with definite assurance that the former was responsible for the latter. From the depth and the direction of the incision Dr. Penna felt justified in stating that the thrust had been fairly powerful and that the weapon had been held in the left hand.

Intrigued by my account of the murder of Garcia, Dr. Penna had also taken the occasion to examine Ramalho's arm, curious to learn whether he, too, bore a tattoo mark. He had found traces that indicated that at one time the skin had been pricked with indelible pigments but what the pattern had been he could not make out. As Garcia had done, so Ramalho had tried to obliterate the mark, and as in the former case, there was present upon the chest the brand of the skull and upon the face, the stark, mad fear of a soul that is damned.

In winding up, the doctor gave it as his opinion that both men belonged to a society of some sort, had turned traitor and had attempted to forget their obligations by removing the symbol of their order. As a result

death and branding had overtaken them. No doubt Parrish was the instrument of vengeance selected by the society in both cases.

McKelvie thought this over for a few minutes. "Perhaps you are right, Doctor, as regards the society. It looks very much like the work of such a crowd, although one cannot be absolutely sure. However, this much I am certain of. Parrish was responsible for the murder of Garcia."

"But, good Heavens," I gasped, "he was shown to be entirely innocent."

Why, I had sat at table with the man on shipboard, had talked to him and even approved of his courtship of the beautiful countess! I refused to believe him a murderer. Yes, I know I had been suspicious and wondered if perhaps he might not have killed Ramalho, but that would have been an offense committed after I had met him and for which I could thereafter have ceased to know him. But to be told that I had hobnobbed with a man whose hands were stained with the blood of a fellow creature——!

"Professor, this is the third time I have spoken to you," McKelvie was saying comically when I finally took cognizance of his words. "I would be obliged if you would stop looking so horrified and answer my question."

But I could not get over the shock of this appalling discovery so quickly. How did McKelvie know? He was not connected with the case at the time. I must have proof.

"He was shown to be innocent," I persisted, following my own train of thought.

"Are you talking about Parrish? If he is a member of a secret society I am only surprised that he was ever allowed to testify," returned McKelvie carelessly. "What do you think, Doctor?"

The doctor shrugged. "I should not have cared to have been in the shoes of that prominent man in New York who so conveniently supported the alibi," he remarked quietly.

"But," I objected stubbornly, "a man of such wealth, education, and political prominence as William K. Vardusi would hardly go out of his way to shield a murderer!"

A cynical smile flickered across McKelvie's face. "If you belonged to a secret society and you were ordered to corroborate an alibi under pain of death I fancy that you wouldn't stand upon the order of your going nor would you inquire too closely into the ethics of the situation," he replied ironically.

"But," I began, bewildered.

He broke in a trifle impatiently. "We are wasting

time. There is no particular use in rehashing an affair that has been shelved. Kindly answer my question, Professor. Is Parrish left-handed?"

I wrinkled my brows in thought, then I answered candidly, "I never thought to notice."

McKelvie lifted his hands despairingly and looked across at the doctor who hid his smile behind an attempted puff of his cigarette.

"The habit of observation, Professor, is one of the greatest assets a man can have," said McKelvie. "Let me illustrate its value. If you could tell us at this moment that Parrish was right-handed we could eliminate him from the case directly. As it is we must go to the trouble of finding him to judge for ourselves."

"Why not assume that he is left-handed," I retorted for I was piqued at his tone. "If he killed Garcia it's quite on the cards that he killed Ramalho, too."

"Ah, but did he? I am inclined to think that he did not."

"Why not?" asked the doctor curiously.

"Because in the newspaper accounts of the murder of Garcia no mention was made that the thrust of the dagger was in any way extraordinary. Had the crime been committed by a left-handed person the doctors would have given the police that very valuable clue. So observation tells me then that in all probability Par-

rish is right-handed," McKelvie explained with a malicious smile.

"Then why trouble to hunt for Parrish if you are so cock-sure that your deductions are right," I growled, disgusted to think that he would stoop to show up my ignorance in order that his own powers might be enhanced by the contrast.

"Because, Professor, the press is not always accurate and all of us are liable to make mistakes. I asked you the question not to confound you but merely to verify my own impressions. Besides there are some questions I should like to ask Parrish and the police may as well save me the trouble of locating him," he added nonchalantly, his eyes on my face.

I said nothing. I was ashamed of my unjust appraisal yet I lacked the courage to tell him how well he had read my thoughts, and apologize for them. Seeing that I had no intention of speaking he rose and held out his hand to the doctor. I knew that he was smiling, not openly, just the merest twitching of his mobile lips, as he thanked Penna for his kindness. Strangely enough I was not offended, I who was always very much upon my dignity and ready to take offense at the least implication; rather was my liking for this frank and unusual man increased by his very audacity.

As before he read my thoughts, which in this instance would not have been difficult since my face

showed plainly that I was not in any way displeased. When we were once more in the car, he turned to me and held out his hand. "I said so before, and I stick to it. You're a good sport, Professor. And now, I am ready to visit the scene of the crime."

CHAPTER IX

A CLUE

As we entered the driveway of Tom's home McKelvie spoke for the first time since leaving the doctor's office. I, too, had preserved silence, not from choice but from necessity. He was deaf to all my attempts at conversation.

"Is this the only other entrance to the garden?" he inquired, nodding toward the small filigree gate which gave ingress to a gravel path which ran parallel to the drive as far as the house and then branched off to meander at will through the garden proper.

"There is a rear entrance for the servants," I answered. "It leads from the back-yard into the alley-way."

"Kindly request the chauffeur to stop the car," he commanded, tersely, giving no indication whatsoever that he had heard my reply. "I prefer to walk to the house. You needn't feel obliged to accompany me, Professor."

But I was far too curious to discover how he would go about solving the murder to abandon him at the

very outset of the investigation. I ordered the car stopped and alighted with him.

I expected that we would set out for the house at once but McKelvie seemed in no great hurry, rather sauntered along the drive as he took a briar-pipe and a tobacco pouch from his pocket. As his slender fingers busied themselves in filling the bowl his eyes darted swiftly from flower-bed to flower-bed taking in the gorgeous profusion of color so boldly flaunted against a background of emerald foliage, for in the tropics nature is lavish with her brush, painting with an abandon engendered by the immensity of her canvas, since here shrubs are trees and trees the giants of the forest.

The day was warm, bright, and the air heavy with the perfume of orange blossoms wafted to us from the trees that lined the wall at the far end of the garden. Not a sound broke the stillness of the morning except the drowsy humming of bees in the honeysuckle arbor or the occasional twitter of a humming-bird as it darted lightninglike from rose-bush to rose-bush, then swept, a flash of blue, to hover among the dark green, leathery leaves of the oleander while it sipped the nectar from the pink and white clusters. So very quiet and peaceful was the scene before us that the reason for McKelvie's presence was made the more incongruous. The tragedy was a figment of my brain. Such was the feel-

ing that obsessed me. Nothing so crude, so startlingly out of place could possibly have occurred to mar the serenity of this home.

With something very like a sigh, perhaps he too was thinking how much pleasanter to sit and dream among the blossoms than to attempt the solution of a case which could only lead to revelations which were better not disclosed, McKelvie slipped his pouch into his pocket and lighted his pipe. Then he continued slowly toward the house, glancing from time to time along the edges of the drive where it merged into the lawn. At the corner of the house he suddenly stooped and examined the ground attentively.

I thought he had forgotten my presence but now he called to me excitedly. His eyes were shining as he pointed to something on the driveway. Bending down I saw that the object was the butt of a cigarette, or more accurately what was once the butt of a cigarette, for the paper had split and the tobacco been scattered about.

"Aren't human beings the inconsistent creatures?" he remarked with a pleased chuckle. "Take the criminal in this case, for instance. He is clever enough to wear gloves and hide the body, yet he leaves us as a souvenir of his presence this bit of paper and tobacco."

"I suppose this is all very lucid to you, but for my part I don't quite appreciate how you can be so certain

that this particular cigarette was left by the murderer. It may have lain there for days or it may have been dropped last night by Tom or one of the servants," I objected.

"Those are possibilities," he admitted, "but not probabilities. Why? Examine this butt and you will readily find the answer."

I looked at the object of our discussion again but to me it was no different from thousands of other cigarette stubs except that it was no longer intact. I said as much.

He smiled. "The value of observation, my dear sir. To me this is a profitable clue for it tells me much. In the first place it is an imported cigarette. Russian. The tobacco betrays that fact. We can therefore eliminate the servants. They are hardly likely to smoke so expensive a brand." As he talked he knelt down and gathered the tobacco and the paper into an old envelope which he took from his pocket and which he then placed in his wallet for safe-keeping. "In the second place," he continued, rising and dusting off the knee of his trousers, "the paper has become wet and has then been dried by the sun which has caused it to become so brittle that it opened of itself. That would imply that the stub had been lying here during a rainstorm. There was a heavy shower late the night of the murder and it has not rained since. Inference that whoever

dropped it must have done so the night of the fifteenth, presumably before the murder since he would not in all probability stop to smoke after his commission of the crime."

"No," I returned, unconvinced, "your last statement is far from logical. Tom smokes and he may have flung it there——"

"A week ago? The gardener or whoever sweeps the drive would have gathered it up before this," he interrupted impatiently. "I think you will find that the garden has been neglected since the murder. Some of those flower-beds are sadly in need of pruning. Besides Mr. Clinton smokes only cigars."

I stared at him in amazement. How had he managed to collect so much data in so short a space of time? He had seen Tom a bare half hour. And then it came to me. In declining the chief of police's offer of cigarettes, Tom had mentioned casually that he only smoked cigars. McKelvie had not appeared to be listening, yet no single detail had escaped him. Just as he had noted that the garden needed attention even as he admired the view. But had he been admiring the view?

"If you will come out of your trance, Professor, I should like to be shown the window that opens into the library."

The words were like a dash of cold water in my face.

I led the way past the front of the house in nettled silence.

"The first window to the left of the main entrance which faces toward the side and not the front of the garden," he mused aloud as we entered the room. "The window was open, you say?"

"According to the police. I didn't notice myself," I said stiffly.

He gave me a quick glance from beneath raised brows, then he laughed softly to himself.

"If we are going to part friends, Professor, you will have to be magnanimous," he began conversationally, settling himself comfortably in the swivel chair at the head of the table. "When I am working on a case I am apt to forget such trifles as difference in age and point of view. I look upon you all as puppets who must dance to my piping until such time as I have worked my way clear to a solution of the crime. You must not then take umbrage at my tone or manner. Come, let us make a compact. I'll furnish the brains and you whatever aid lies within your power. Is it a bargain, Professor?"

He had been gazing idly about the room as he spoke but now he held out his hand with such a winning smile that despite the left-handed compliment he paid me, I hastened to return his friendly clasp, my previous

rancor forgotten under the spell of his voice and personality.

At this moment Cesario approached the door and announced in a voice that trembled that luncheon was served. Evidently he had no desire to linger near the scene of the crime. The words had barely left his mouth when he had vanished down the hall.

McKelvie smiled indulgently. "Poor fellow. Between superstition and terror he is in a bad way."

In the hall we were met by Tom who escorted McKelvie into the dining-room and introduced him to the assembled family. I saw the black eyes take quick appraisal of each face as McKelvie was presented, nor did I imagine that it would take him very long to discover the salient characteristics of each, since no two of them seemed to be affected in the same manner by the tragedy. Tom wore a worried, harassed look as though he were more troubled by what he had determined yet dreaded to find out than by the actual death of his brother-in-law. Maria Theresa was pale, distraught, nervous, Dona Helena more frightened than sad while Judith's haggard eyes held a world of misery in their gray depths. Only Ricardo was himself, boy-like glorying in the sudden excitement, as yet too young to understand the true significance of the deed.

After luncheon, a dismal attempt at a meal on the part of most of those present, Tom asked me whether

I would mind taking charge of the investigation since he could not neglect his business and in all probability McKelvie would need someone on hand to answer questions and to introduce him to those persons whom he might wish to interview. Gladly I acceded to Tom's wishes not only because I was myself intensely interested in discovering the murderer of Ramalho but also because I could see that my assumption of this duty would lift a load from his mind. Hardly had I promised when Dona Helena drew me aside.

"Senhor," she said in a low tone, "I wish you would use your influence with Tom to make him give up this inquiry."

"Why, Dona Helena?" I asked. Standing thus, close to her, I could see how uneasy she was. Her full red lips were trembling despite her effort to control them, and her beautiful brown eyes were dark with tears.

"Because I am afraid. If anything should happen to Tom—" Her voice broke on the words.

"Nothing is going to happen to Tom," I said reassuringly. "He has given me full charge so if there is any danger to be run it is I, not he, who will bear the brunt of it. And there is no one to care much whether I live or die, you know," I added, lightly.

"Oh, Senhor," she whispered, crossing herself. "Do not jest about death. It is too serious a matter for that. I wish you would give up the case."

"But, don't you want to know who killed your brother?" I persisted, trying to discover what she had in mind.

"No, I don't. It may make trouble for us and it cannot bring him back." She shuddered involuntarily. "Be careful, Senhor. Someone has just walked over my grave. It is an omen. Do not disregard it."

I smiled at her childishness in believing the old superstition that an involuntary shudder proclaims the passage of some person across one's unmarked grave, and telling her I would take good care of myself, I begged her to excuse me. Then I followed McKelvie into the library.

"An interesting family, quite well worth studying," he remarked, refilling his pipe. "Judith, particularly. The others are fairly transparent. Mr. Clinton is worrying about what his wife may or may not know and she in her turn is terrified that some harm may come to him. Maria Theresa, too, seems to have forgotten her brother in her anxiety over her lover. Neville St. John, you said his name was? He will bear interviewing. But Judith is different. She has something on her mind which we must try to discover, something besides the horror and remorse that she is suffering at her husband's tragic end. But more of this later. It is time to get down to work."

He strolled to the window where he stood looking out

over the garden and blowing smoke-rings as though he had no other interest in the world than that of achieving a perfect circle. This attitude was hardly compatible with his last statement. I grew impatient.

"Really, Mr. McKelvie—" I began, but he held up a slender hand to enjoin silence.

"Patience. Let me think it out first," he exclaimed curtly.

Evidently he was not to be hurried nor did he seem to take account of time as a factor in solving his problem. Thus easily had he fallen a victim to the spell of the tropics where time is of no moment and a pleasant languor deadens the senses to the obligations of the hour. Or so I believed. Later I found that he had his own reasons for standing so long at that window.

I had about reached the limit of my patience when he finally turned back into the room, and I watched him in silence as he examined the floor with minute attention. Gradually his search carried him from the window to the urn beside the door and I joined him as he remained looking down speculatively upon the huge receptacle. Made of terra-cotta it was shaped like an enormous jardinière. It stood two feet from the floor and was of sufficient girth so that one could hide in it with no discomfort by assuming a crouching position. The lid, which lay on the floor in three pieces, was made of the same material as the urn. It had been slightly

convex and had a ring at the top by which one could lift it. As it did not weigh more than ten pounds the murderer could not have found it a very difficult feat to remove it from the jar. I had seen Tom's son lift it to the floor with no apparent trouble.

McKelvie eyed the urn frowningly and I guessed that it had roused a train of thought for which he could not at the moment find a suitable explanation.

"Strange," he remarked as he bent over to examine the interior. "Something important, in Judith's eyes at least, must have been in this urn, but what the deuce could it have been and how did it get in here?"

"I don't follow you."

"Judith had to have a reason for lifting the lid of the urn," he answered, his voice echoing oddly within the receptacle as he hung over the edge with his head almost touching the bottom. "It is preposterous to suppose that she was looking for her husband."

"By jove," I said slowly. I had been so taken up with the tragedy that such an idea had never even obtruded itself upon me. I had just accepted Judith's statement as a matter of course, but I now realized that if the lid had been on the urn, as presumably it was, she must have had some incentive for raising it since as McKelvie pointed out she could hardly have been looking for her husband. The notion that she might have killed Ramalho I had discarded in view of the fact that

she was not strong enough to have placed the body in the urn.

By this time McKelvie had emerged from the receptacle somewhat red of face but with the frown erased from his brow. He drew up a chair to the table and motioned me to a seat.

"Well?" I inquired. "What was it that was in the urn?"

"I'm not so sure. I have a theory but I must test it first before I can give it to you as an actual fact. Let us drop that side of the inquiry for the time being and reconstruct the crime from the known data as we have it so far."

CHAPTER X

RECONSTRUCTION

"I HAVE been gathering my information at random from various sources, a procedure which is not conducive to clarity of thought," began McKelvie, drawing contentedly on his pipe. "For that reason I am going to trespass on your indulgence and repeat briefly what we know so far, beginning with a certain happening in New York."

"There is no necessity to apologize. I shall be glad to have the case presented as a whole."

"Very well, then. A month and a half ago a Brazilian, Benjamin Garcia, was found murdered in his room at the Hotel Magnificent. On the strength of the testimony gathered from various witnesses Gilbert Parrish was asked to attend the inquest and was about to be remanded for trial when William K. Vardusi came forward with an alibi which caused the police to release the suspected man. Am I right so far?"

"Yes, except that you have made no mention of the brand."

"I'll take that up in good time. You were taken

aback when I claimed to know that Parrish had stabbed Garcia. I really didn't know it as an actual fact, but the evidence is such that any other deduction would be puerile. Here is a man of extraordinary appearance—how many men in New York limp and have semi-circular scars on their cheeks besides having a foreign air? To assume that two such men exist is stretching probability; but to say that two such men were at the hotel that night is to pull entirely out of joint the long-suffering arm of coincidence. So we can safely deduce that Parrish was with Garcia at the time of the murder and therefore he was the one who committed the deed. The question is why? And why did Vardusi, a man of probity and integrity, alibi him?"

"Because they all belonged to the same secret society. I thought you agreed with Penna when he made that plain to us," I returned, somewhat surprised at his questions.

He smiled and shook his head. "I didn't agree. I only said perhaps. I was allowing Penna to amuse himself as a shield to keep him from probing too closely into my own ideas. It is not always well to tell everyone what one knows."

"But—" I remarked, wrinkling my brow. He put up a house of cards and knocked it down so swiftly that I did not even secure the barest glimpse of his drift.

He continued imperturbably, though there was a twinkle in his eyes for my obtuseness. "The theory of a secret society is all very well as far as it goes but I can explode it with two remarks. One, Vardusi is not the type of man who belongs to such an organization; and two, Gilbert Parrish, according to your own account, became frightfully exercised at the bare mention of the skull. If he were a member in good standing why should he fear the symbol of the order?"

"He might have turned traitor," I suggested.

"Traitors are not intrusted with commissions. No, no. This is not the work of a secret society. Whatever reason Parrish had for killing Garcia, he was sufficiently in the right to cause Vardusi to step down from his high pedestal."

"What about the brand and the tattoo?" I asked.

"Garcia was branded after he was dead. Perhaps Parrish branded him; perhaps some other person used the skull. I do not know. The tattoo is a different matter and a third reason for discarding the secret society theory. I have been in Italy and I have studied the methods of most of these organizations. Tattooing is too conspicuous to suit them. It is more likely to be the symbol of some promise between two or three men. Parrish, Garcia, Ramalho, and doubtless a fourth unknown. Garcia proved false to his trust and he died.

Ramalho the same." He shrugged and paused to relight his pipe.

"That is all mere speculation. Let's get back to the realm of facts. That both Garcia and Ramalho attempted to deface the tattoo shows that both men knew pretty well what to expect in case they did fail to keep their agreement, and therefore they presumably tried to hide their identity. I do not believe that Garcia registered under his true name, and I shall presently try to find out all I can concerning Ramalho's past. With diabolical cunning the avenger sent his victims notification of their death sentence. Think what that means, Professor. To live forever in fear and dread; not to know when or how but to know that at some time when you are talking to a friend or perhaps riding through the city, the knife of the assassin will find its mark in your heart. What a fiend the fellow must be to evolve such a scheme for satiating his desire for vengeance!"

"I'd rather not conjure up so terrible an image. Why do you believe that Parrish did not kill Ramalho also?" I replied to change the gruesome topic.

"Because this murder is so much more skillfully done. No blunt weapon used. By the way, I do not agree with the police physician who claimed that Garcia had been stabbed from behind. Such a theory is absurd on the face of it."

"Why?"

"What about the look on Garcia's face? If he had been stabbed from behind he would not have known who killed him, he would have been dead before his consciousness could grasp the fact that he had been stabbed."

"Then there are two avengers?" I was becoming more and more perplexed.

"No, not necessarily. Parrish may have been an emissary, the tool of the dominant mind behind these crimes. And we may find that in this case, too, another hand than that of the avenger is responsible for the actual deed. But all this is beside the point. To get back to the present. Ramalho was so affected by the sight of the skull that he determined on flight. That is another point to look into. Why did the avenger risk losing the skull by sending it to the victim? Or is that but one of many such curios?"

"The skull sent to Ramalho was the same as the one I picked up on the deck of the ship, I'm pretty certain," I responded.

"Which makes it all the more complicated, and incredible." He pulled meditatively on his pipe for a space before he resumed, "While Ramalho was hesitating, Parrish called upon him and succeeded in lessening his fears to such an extent that by the time dinner was over Ramalho had sufficiently recovered his self-possession to think of spending the evening away from

home, or so I should judge from the reported conversation between husband and wife. He descended the stairs and twenty minutes later you were startled by Judith's cry which led to the discovery of the body in the urn. So far so good. The police were called in and from them and our own investigations we glean the following facts."

He held up his hand and checked the items off on his fingers as he talked. "One, Ramalho was killed by a dagger that belongs to Judith. Two, he was robbed of all his valuables. Three, he was branded by a skull which has since vanished. Four, the murderer is left-handed, smokes Russian cigarettes, was clever enough to wear gloves, yet foolishly attempted to hide the body. Now let us reconstruct as far as possible what took place in the library that night."

"What took place?" I echoed. I had deemed his previous conversation, what he had later called it, mere speculation with no foundation on fact, yet here was he seriously talking about divining what had occurred when the only persons who could possibly know the truth of that happening were the murderer and his victim. "Surely you are not implying that you can relate every circumstance connected with the commission of the crime in this room that night?" I said incredulously.

"My dear Professor, if a scientist from a couple of

old bones can reconstruct the creature from which he claims they came; if you yourself from a few bits of pottery can gauge the civilization of a bygone age, surely with a little imagination to aid me I can reason back from effect to cause."

I caught at one word. "Imagination is all very well in its place, Mr. McKelvie, but it will never put the murderer of Ramalho where he belongs."

He smiled indulgently, like a master who is willing to reason with the vagaries of a pupil. "If I had not the power within myself to rise above the commonplace and view things in the light of fancy, I should resign this moment and leave the undertaking to such prosaic persons as yourself and the police, Professor. But let me give you a demonstration of what imagination can do toward solving a mysterious crime. Let us take the murderer and follow his movements that night. He entered by the front gate which I understand from Mr. Clinton is not locked until ten o'clock, and he stood at the corner of the house while he waited for his victim. During the interim he steadied his nerves or bolstered his courage by smoking a cigarette. The action was habitual and he dropped the butt mechanically, stepping on it to put it out without really being conscious of what he was doing. As the cigarette was practically consumed, we can approximate the time of waiting. Let us say ten minutes."

"Just a moment. How do you know the murderer was waiting——"

"How do I know anything about the case? By putting together the facts as they present themselves to me and by making of the whole one perfect pattern. Since the person who called on Ramalho that night, let us call him X for the sake of brevity, did stand and smoke, the natural conclusion follows that he was waiting for something or somebody. Otherwise he would have gone to the door and rung the bell."

"If you would kindly let me finish my sentence you might possibly learn what I intended to ask you," I put in patiently, remembering our compact.

Even that polite rebuke didn't faze him. "What did you want to know?" he demanded in a tone of voice which indicated that I and not he was to blame for the misunderstanding.

"I wanted to ask you why you assume that it was Ramalho that X was awaiting. Supposing it were not premeditated murder; supposing that Neville St. John, let us say, was waiting for Maria Theresa and seeing the light entered the library to find Ramalho. They quarrelled and on the impulse St. John picked up the dagger and killed his brother-in-law. Then horrified, he robbed the body as a blind, hid it, and replaced the dagger on the table. As for the fingermarks, if he had the wit to hide the body what was to prevent his having

the forethought to clean the hilt as well as the blade of the dagger?"

"The point is well taken," he said with a slight smile, "but unfortunately you have not soared high enough into the realm of fancy. You have looked at the matter from only one angle and so there are flaws in your reasoning. In the first place, if St. John had had a rendezvous with Maria Theresa, she would not have ascended to the drawing-room with you. She would have made some excuse to get away unobserved. In the next place, only the blade of the dagger was cleaned. Recall the smear of blood the police found on the hilt. Because he wore gloves, X saw no reason for wasting time upon the hilt. In the third place, you were in the library twenty minutes after the crime was committed. How long do you think it takes to quarrel, to become sufficiently enraged to harbor the thought of murder, to pick up a dagger and kill the victim, to ponder what to do to efface the crime and hide the body? More than twenty minutes I'll wager when you take into consideration that Ramalho was not only robbed but branded as well."

"St. John gave Ramalho the skull," I reminded him.

"Yes, but that might have been pure coincidence, or if St. John is the murderer then he came prepared to commit the crime. Don't overlook the fact that this is a case of premeditated murder."

He paused, then added quietly, "I wasn't assuming that X was waiting for Ramalho. I know. How? Very simply. The moment Ramalho came into the library and turned on the light, X stepped in and killed him, for according to the doctor's verdict Ramalho must have died immediately after coming downstairs. Under the circumstances then, X could hardly have been waiting for anyone else."

He sat back in expectation of my approval, but I was not convinced. I proceeded to find fault with his reasoning as he had done with mine. How did he know all this? Was he romancing for my benefit or did he himself believe what he had told me? His very cocksureness made me desire actual proof for his statements.

McKelvie had been watching me closely. "What's the trouble, Professor?" he asked, amused. "You don't seem to be in accord with me."

"No, I'm not. You are not sufficiently explicit. For instance, how do you know that Ramalho turned on the light?"

"Because through Mr. Clinton, I questioned Cesario while you were talking to Mrs. Clinton. The butler claims that the light was out in the library when the family adjourned to the second floor after dinner. The light was on when you entered the room after you heard

the cry." He shrugged as much as to say, "What greater proof could you desire?"

"Not proven," I contended. "Remember that Judith was in the room before me. She may have turned it on."

"Of course that is true, but that does not alter my original statement. When Ramalho entered, the library was in darkness. The first thing that would occur to him would be to switch on the light. That is an almost instinctive action with a person who enters a darkened room. Here's another refutation of your skepticism. X was expecting a signal otherwise he would have entered the library when he first arrived. What was that signal? Doubtless Ramalho himself silhouetted against the lighted window frame, so that there might be no mistake. Evidently the two had arranged for a meeting in the library."

"But why? Why should Ramalho make an appointment with this man, X, if he was so in fear of death? The Brazilian knew what the skull meant," I expostulated.

"Ah, that is something that I can't account for yet, not even by the most extravagant flight of the imagination. But the bare fact remains. That they did have an interview planned is evidenced by Ramalho's going into the library at all. If he had merely been going out he would have used the front door."

"Might he not have entered the library to get something he may have wanted to take with him?" I conjectured.

McKelvie allowed his gaze to wander about the bare walls and finally to settle speculatively upon the bookcase filled with curios. "I rather fancy this is called a library by courtesy of what it may have once contained," he hazarded, and I nodded agreement.

"Tom had his books removed upstairs when he unpacked his collection for my benefit," I explained.

"From which we might argue that there is nothing in this room that was likely to interest Ramalho. Certainly it would not have been the ivory skull," continued McKelvie, significantly.

"Yes, I presume you are right, and there was a prearranged meeting in the library between the two men, Ramalho and X. What happened next?" I was no better off than I had been before. The whole thing was so preposterous, so illogical. But I did not want to side-track McKelvie by asking too many questions.

"We will deduce that Ramalho closed the door behind him," McKelvie resumed the thread of his narrative. "Otherwise anyone coming down the stairs would have interrupted proceedings. The same applies to the window. X or Ramalho either one may have closed it. They held their conversation here by the

table and it was not a very long one. A few minutes after his entrance X had stabbed his victim."

McKelvie rose and pointed to a spot, a brown stain that looked to be a part of the mosaic design of the floor.

"Blood," he said briefly. "That is where the body fell which accounts for my deduction that they conversed near the table, and also tells us that X plunged the dagger in and removed it immediately. Then he branded his victim, robbed him, carried him to the urn and dumped him in, replacing the lid."

"A rather remarkable feat, don't you think, to carry a dead body that far?" I commented drily, gauging with my eye the distance between the table and the urn.

"Five feet. I measured it awhile ago," he assented. "Yes, as you say a difficult task, since a dead body has no buoyancy and would be a rather heavy weight for a man to carry. There is no evidence, however, that he dragged the body to the urn, for if he had there would have been no more blood-stains, whereas you can see for yourself the trail of spots leading to the urn."

I looked at the brown spots which he pointed out and realized the accuracy of his deduction. X must have turned the body over to rob it, and had he then dragged it to the urn there would have been no more evidence of blood on the floor. When I glanced up

McKelvie added, "Therefore X must have carried it, impossible as this may seem, which gives us the added clue that he is a man of unusual strength."

"It should not be so very hard a task to find X then. He seems to have left us quite a collection of clues to his personality," I could not help remarking.

"Yes, that is just what troubles me. It's much too early in the game, and not at all according to rule for me to know so many incriminating details. There is something amiss, but I can't put my finger on the weak spot in my logic. The trail has been clearly indicated and it was only necessary to follow the signposts. But let us drop that for awhile and see what we can make of the more puzzling turns in this affair."

He took a turn around the room, his brows drawn together in thought. "Why did X attempt to hide the body? He must have known that Ramalho would have been missed in the morning and that a search would reveal the fact that he had probably not left the house. Every nook and cranny would be pried into and discovery be imminent."

"He may have done it to give himself time to escape," I suggested.

McKelvie shook his head. "He was under the impression that he had effaced all traces of himself. Besides to leave the city would render him liable to suspicion since the police were bound to take cognizance

of all of Ramalho's acquaintances. X killed the Brazilian in cold blood and was therefore running no risks of being found out. He has an alibi all prepared in case he needs it as we'll discover when we locate him. This being true, why go to the trouble of hiding the body? It could make little difference to him whether the crime was brought to light that night or next morning."

I had no answer with which to satisfactorily explain this query and after a pause, during which he resumed his pacing of the room, he continued, "There is not much use in wasting time guessing at his reason. Let us pass on to the next peculiarity. Why was the dagger placed on the table? Why didn't X take it away with him? Why leave it as evidence unless he desired to incriminate Judith, or his putting it there meant that he was returning it to the place from which he had taken it? But in that event why should he come prepared with gloves and leave the weapon to chance?"

A dim recollection had been struggling in my mind for recognition as McKelvie talked, and now I interrupted him with a triumphant cry.

"That's just where it was. The dagger was on the table. I recall now that I noticed it without being really conscious of doing so when Parrish and the Countess were talking to Ramalho that evening before dinner. I was standing by the table listening to them

and I remember glancing down and seeing the dagger. I forgot it the next moment. Your words brought the occurrence back to me."

"That was just before dinner, you say? Was the dagger on the table when you left the library to dress for dinner?" he asked eagerly.

I closed my eyes and reviewed the events of that afternoon. I had been working in the library from luncheon time until I went upstairs to dress for dinner. No one had passed through the room during that interval. But wait. Judith had been in the garden with her brother. Perhaps she had placed the dagger on the table after I had left the room. I was positive that it could not have been placed on the table previous to that time because I had cleared that article of furniture of its encumbrances in order to spread a map upon it. Had the dagger been among the objects on the table I should have recalled handling it.

"That clears up one difficulty, then," remarked McKelvie when I had replied to his question. "Whoever used that dagger knew beforehand that it was on this table, yet how could he be sure that it would still be there when he wanted it? How did he know but that any one of you, Judith herself might not carry it away?"

"Unless he came prepared with a weapon of his own and seeing the dagger on the table decided to use that

instead and so obviate the necessity of ridding himself of the weapon," I pointed out.

"I don't think so. The whole affair was carried out too quickly and with too much precision to have allowed for any changes of plan. X knew exactly what he was going to do and he did it without having to stop to think about it. I doubt whether in his absorption with the task in hand, he would have noticed the dagger on the table, surrounded as it was by various other objects. No, he had planned to use the dagger before he entered the room that night, and the only plausible solution is to say that he came in and appropriated it while the family was at dinner.

"And now we come to the question of what was in the urn." He dumped his pipe and put it in his pocket. "As the only person who can give us any definite information on that subject is Judith, supposing we see what a few judicious questions will do toward clearing up that point."

He walked to the window and waved his hand toward a far corner of the garden. "Isn't that a summer-house in the distance?"

"Yes, though in reality it is nothing but a honeysuckle arbor."

"If my eyes are not at fault, I believe that is where we shall find the lady whom we are seeking," and he stepped out onto the garden path.

CHAPTER XI

JUDITH'S ACCOUNT

INSTEAD of cutting directly across the garden to the arbor McKelvie, either by accident or design, followed the path beside the house that led to the backyard and the servants' quarters. Here we encountered Cesario who was engaged in sweeping the yard with a broom made of twigs. McKelvie watched him idly for a moment, then he turned to me.

"Ask him whether he looks after the front gardens, too," he ordered.

I put the question to Cesario who replied in a trembling voice that Senhor Ramalho had dismissed the gardener for being impudent late the afternoon of the tragedy, and that since then no one had cared for the gardens.

McKelvie raised his brows. "Humph," he remarked. "What's the gardener's name?"

Again I translated both inquiry and reply. "He says the man is a *caboclo*, that is partly Indian, a big, ugly brute of a fellow but harmless enough if left to himself. He is called Fernandez."

"And did he leave at once upon being dismissed?"

"He doesn't know, but believes that the gardener packed his belongings at once," I explained.

"It's probably of no importance. He would not be in the habit of smoking Russian cigarettes, nor be clever enough to think out the murder. We had better hasten if we expect to catch Judith before she returns to the house," he said.

As we approached the summer-house I caught a glimpse of black draperies and knew that McKelvie had been right in stating that we should find the girl we sought within the small inclosure. How he had managed to distinguish her presence from so great a distance was a mystery to me, but I had no time to speculate upon his remarkable phenomenon, for at this moment McKelvie was bowing before Judith with a deferential air which in nowise concealed the satisfaction with which he had noted, even as I had done, the instant change upon the girl's face from bitter reflection to a masklike rigidity that revealed nothing of her thoughts.

"Madam," began McKelvie immediately, "I am sorry to have to intrude upon your grief but there are a number of questions that I find it imperative to ask you. If you will kindly be seated, I will try to make the interview as short as possible."

Judith accepted the situation with supreme indiffer-

ence as she seated herself upon the rustic bench which ran around one side of the arbor. McKelvie gave her a penetrating glance as if he would read what was going on in the brain behind that white, tense face and those stony grey eyes; then he spoke abruptly, brutally.

"What were you looking for in the urn the night of the murder, Madame?"

With a cry like that of a wounded tigress, she sprang to her feet and faced McKelvie, anger and terror fighting for mastery in every line of her quivering features, then with a moan of anguish she dropped back upon the bench and hid her face in her trembling hands.

McKelvie stood looking down contritely on that bowed head. "I'm sorry, Madame, if I startled you," he said soothingly, gently, as to a frightened child. "I was afraid you would deny the implication if I merely led up to the question gradually."

The deep voice had its desired effect. "How did you know I—I was looking for anything?" she sobbed, but she had ceased to tremble.

"I hardly supposed that you made it a practice to look into that urn every evening," he responded.

"Do—do you know what it was that I was looking for?" she continued, feeling her ground.

"I am waiting for you to disclose that fact," was the calm reply.

A quivering sigh of relief was the only answer, then

the girl seemed literally to pull herself together. When she finally raised her head, her countenance bore no trace of her recent agitation. The masklike calm, the calm of desperation, had descended upon it again.

"I will tell you what you wish to know," she said, hurriedly, keeping her eyes on her hands which she held clasped tightly in her lap. "You know, of course, that —that I was not happy in my marriage. I—my husband became infatuated with the dancer, Dolores Castro, and he saw no reason why I should object to his neglect of me. My place was in the home, he said."

She paused to regain control of her voice which had gradually become more and more bitter in tone.

"The day of the murder my brother called to see me. I told him of my unhappiness. He threatened to kill Duarte. I was frightened and begged Neville to be reasonable. He refused. We talked a long time and I finally persuaded him to heed me. I watched him leave the grounds and then entered the house through the library where I encountered Duarte. He knew I was angry and he tried to placate me with a pearl necklace. I flung it from me saying that Dolores would appreciate it more than I. It happened that the urn was uncovered—and the necklace accidentally fell into the receptacle. That night after Duarte had left me, I fell to wondering whether he had taken the necklace to Dolores. I—I went down the back way to the li-

brary. The lid was on the urn. I lifted it and saw—" She faltered in her speech and the words died away into an ineffectual murmur.

McKelvie, who had been pacing the little summer-house while she told us her story, now halted before her. "Then you did not take the necklace from the urn?"

She made a gesture of repugnance. "No, no. I screamed and ran out into the hall. I do not know what became of the necklace. The police——"

"The police did not take it," McKelvie returned gravely. "Therefore we shall have to assume that the murderer must have carried it away with him."

"No, he wouldn't have—he couldn't!" The words came almost without volition before Judith regained her former calm poise. "I mean," she said with a strained smile, "that no one could know that the necklace was there but Duarte and me. Duarte must have taken it away with him, that is, he must have reclaimed it from the urn as soon as I had left the library. Don't you think that I am right?" She seemed to be begging for a confirmation of her story.

"No doubt at all. Thank you for the hint. I shall have to search among your husband's effects then, since he did not have a chance to carry it away from the house himself. By the way, the police say that your

husband bore a tattoo mark on his arm. Can you describe it to me?"

"No—I couldn't." She paused abruptly, then contradicted herself in a whisper as though she feared the very leaves of the honeysuckle might give ear to her confession. "It was just his initials, D. R."

"And when did he efface it?"

Judith opened her eyes wide and stared up at McKelvie, fascinated. "How do you know so much about these things?" she asked in awe.

"Nothing miraculous in my appearance of knowledge I assure you," he replied with a slight smile. "The police declare the mark has been effaced. Since you can describe it to me, naturally it follows that you must know when your husband attempted to rid himself of it."

"Oh!" She was relieved by the explanation. "He effaced it about the beginning of July," she said slowly.

"Why?"

"Indeed I do not know." She wrung her hands in protest. "He forbade my asking him what it represented."

"Can you think of nothing which may have happened at the time to account for his act?" persisted McKelvie.

"No. But, yes, I do remember, now. His lawyer, Senhor Santiago, called on him one day and gave him

a package. The contents excited him greatly and it was right after that episode that he effaced the mark on his arm."

"What were these contents?"

"Some letters and a photograph. He read the letters and destroyed them. I do not know what they contained."

"And the photograph?" he inquired eagerly.

"Was the photograph of a very beautiful young woman," replied Judith tonelessly.

"What became of it?"

"I do not know. He was always receiving photographs of beautiful young women. I had ceased to care what he did with them," she answered dispiritedly.

"Have you any objections to giving me the lawyer's address?"

"I suppose not. His office is on the Ouvidor No. 56."

"Note that, will you please, Professor," he asked of me. Then to her, tactfully changing the subject, "Did you ever hear of Benjamin Garcia?"

"Garcia? No, I am sure I have not," she returned, puzzled. "Why?"

McKelvie had a way of ignoring questions which he did not choose to answer. He sprang another surprise. "Have you ever seen the ivory skull, Madame?"

I had thought her pale before. Now she became positively ashen and her slight form shook as with a

chill. "No, no, oh, no," she cried in accents of fear.

McKelvie gave her time to recover her lost poise. He took out his cigarette case, a gold monogramed affair I noticed, and asked permission to indulge. She nodded mechanically, still panic-stricken.

"Perhaps you also feel the need of something to quiet your nerves," he suggested, proffering the case.

She stared up at him with a look of disgust in her eyes. "I do not smoke," she said with dignity, rising and advancing toward the entrance.

"Just one more question," begged McKelvie, returning the case to his pocket without helping himself as if he had forgotten his reason for taking it out. "Did you by any chance lay your paper-cutter on the library table any time during the day of the murder?"

She twined her fingers in and out nervously before she finally said in a low voice, "No, I did not."

"Do you know of anyone else who may have done so?"

She hesitated, then replied in a troubled tone, "Anyone might have. I—I had mislaid it sometime previous."

"The day before?"

"The day before," she repeated parrotlike, catching at the suggestion as a drowning man does at a straw.

"Thank you. That is all at present. You will pardon us if we do not accompany you?"

Judith inclined her blonde head and greatly relieved moved slowly away in the direction of the house. As soon as she was hidden from view by a bend in the path, McKelvie darted to one corner of the summer-house and picked up something from the ground which he proceeded to examine with a slight chuckle. When he was satisfied that he had deduced all that he could from it, he extended it to me. To my astonishment I saw that it was the merest stub of a cigarette.

"Russian," he remarked, tersely, as he placed it in the envelope beside the other one he had found. "Madame Judith was evidently not alone in the summer-house. I suspected as much when I stood at the window of the library after luncheon and saw her slip out the back way and make for this corner of the garden. As you see my suspicions are verified."

"So that is why you craved a cigarette after consuming a pipeful of tobacco. I began to think you must be an inveterate smoker," I returned with dawning intelligence.

He smiled. "I'm pretty bad, but not as bad as that, Professor. There was method in my madness this time, you see." He frowned, then added with a sigh, "There was a time in the good old days when the presence of a cigarette stub proclaimed the gender of the smoker. Now, however, it is a physical impossibility to decide without actual proof. Since Madame Judith does not

smoke, she must have had a caller. It's up to me to discover whether this person was a man or a woman. I'm inclined to deduce that it was the former."

"Why?"

"We can safely say that Mrs. Clinton and Maria Theresa do not indulge. The craze does not seem to have attacked as yet the home-loving Brazilian woman. The only other member of the sex who might have an interest in the tragedy would be Dolores Castro. She doubtless smokes, being of the demi-mondaine type, but Judith would not trouble to shield one whom she abhors as wholesomely as she does this woman. And it is very evident that Judith is shielding someone. It may be her brother. It is more likely to be a former lover as the police official so shrewdly hinted."

"Where did this former lover come from?" I inquired, annoyed at the continual reference to this mythical individual. "I have seen no one who might answer to that description, no one who is at all interested in Judith Ramalho. If she is shielding anyone, it is her brother, Neville."

We had been walking away from the summer-house and were gradually approaching the iron door in the wall which separated the alley from the garden.

"No, she is not shielding her brother. She was too wrought up for it to have been a mere brother."

"Why didn't you ask her who it was, then?" I inter-

rupted, impatiently. "Why guess when you had the chance to learn the truth?"

"Because she would have denied it, flatly and positively, and what good would that have done us, Professor? We should have been no forwarder; we should merely have prolonged a painful interview—that is the only part of my hobby that I detest, this having to probe into the secret recesses of a woman's soul—" He broke off abruptly to gaze moodily at the wall before him before he shook off the somber reflection and continued, "Again she would have had her suspicions aroused by the question, whereas at the present moment she is laboring under the delusion that she has completely taken us in. I did not need further denial to tell me that she is shielding someone she loves." He lowered his voice as he added impressively, "There was not one atom of truth in that ingenious tale she related to us just now."

"Isn't that rather strong?" I protested.

"Hardly strong enough. Oh, yes, she did tell us one or two things that were founded on fact, but I had in mind particularly her story of the events of that evening. In lifting the lid of the urn, she was concerned in finding—not a necklace—but the ivory skull!"

CHAPTER XII

NEVILLE ST. JOHN

I stood stock-still and gazed at McKelvie in dumb wonderment, whereupon he broke into a laugh.

"I wasn't making the statement to be dramatic," he said. "Though, I admit, that it must have been a bit startling hurled at you in that heartless fashion. There were marks in the bottom of the urn where the emerald eyes of the skull had scratched the pottery when it was removed from the receptacle. As I read the marks, the person was in such a hurry that he put in his hand and drew the skull up along the side of the urn."

"Might not those scratches have been made by the necklace?" I was prepared to believe anything no matter how incredible rather than admit that Judith knew aught of the ivory skull.

"A pearl necklace? Besides, I found traces of that acid used to brand the victim of the tragedy. I'd very much like to know what it was doing in the urn."

"If you knew this why did you harrow Judith's feelings by asking her what she was looking for?" I demanded, suspiciously.

"Because I wanted to learn whether she connected the skull with the person she is shielding. Evidently she does or she would not have taken the trouble to concoct that story for our benefit. I wish I knew whether she was telling the truth about that tattoo mark," he mused. "Do you suppose that Mrs. Clinton would know?"

But I was following my own train of thought and my remark was irrelevant. "There is no one for Judith to shield since you eliminate St. John. Are you of the opinion then that she is guilty? If she knows all about this accursed skull she may have been the one to have wielded her own dagger, particularly as she had a grievance against her husband." I was trying to discover his attitude in regard to Judith.

"Circumstantial evidence, Professor," said McKelvie, quietly. "You have fallen into the error that the police are so prone to make. You have placed your entire faith in evidence which can often be made to point in opposite directions depending on the angle of vision. You need not be afraid that I shall drag Judith into court. By your own showing the dagger was on the table. Any number of persons had access to it. If the girl were guilty she would hardly go to the length of hiding the body only to reveal it to you in the next breath. She could not have carried it in any case, and also she is shielding someone whom she believes to be

guilty. That alone proclaims her innocence, and your carefully gathered evidence is shot full of holes."

By the expression of his face I knew that he had not been deceived into thinking that I had at any time deemed Judith guilty, but I was none the less glad of the argument which he had amused himself in expounding since it showed me that Judith was to be left out of our further inquiries.

"And you are positive that she is not shielding St. John?" I queried after a slight pause.

"I'm convinced of it. We can easily establish that fact, however, by interviewing him. Before we leave, I want you to do me a favor. Will you be my ambassador instead of my interpreter this time?"

"With pleasure," I responded.

"That is a rash reply. You have now committed yourself to a task which may not suit you. Go and ask Mrs. Clinton if she can get hold of that photograph of which Judith spoke. Also inquire what the tattoo mark looked like and how long Ramalho had borne it."

I left him examining the iron door and returned to the house. I was not particularly pleased with my errand just as he had hinted, but having given my word I did not like to retract it. Besides, I appreciated the delicacy which had prevented him from asking Judith to secure the picture for him. Again I had no great faith in Dona Helena's power to help us.

I found her in the kitchen, a big airy, stone-floored room, where she was helping Esmeralda, the cook, out of some intricate culinary difficulty. The common round of daily life leaves us no time for idle grieving. When I beckoned to her, Dona Helena gave the negress some hasty instructions, then followed me out into the hall.

"What is it, Senhor? Has anything happened?" she inquired, alarmed.

"No, nothing has occurred. I merely came to make a request. You have been helping Judith go through her husband's effects, have you not?" I began, rather diffidently.

She shook her head a little sadly. "I have been carrying on that task alone. Judith refuses to have anything to do with the matter, Senhor."

"Then you are just the one to help me," I returned quickly. "Early in July your lawyer gave your brother a photograph of a young woman. Could you get it for me, please?"

"In July?" She furrowed her clear brows in an effort to remember. "Yes, I think I recall the circumstance. She was very lovely but he would not tell me who she was. He had the picture on his dresser for a while. I will see if I can find it for you."

I paced the lower hall while I awaited her return, trying to decide in what way the photograph could pos-

sibly further the solution of the mystery. Did McKelvie think a woman was responsible for Ramalho's death? But no woman could have carried the body to the urn.

"Here it is, Senhor." I had been in such a brown study that I had not heard the sound of her approach. She held out the picture with a tremulous gesture. "You will be careful, will you not, Senhor?"

"More than careful. Another question before you go, Senhora. What was the mark that your brother had on his arm?" I asked, pleased with my previous success.

The look in her eyes changed to one of deep concern. "I cannot tell you, Senhor. He forbade it," she faltered.

"Dona Helena, would you mind telling me how you came to know that he carried this mark on his arm?" I was endeavoring to imitate McKelvie and do as he would under the circumstances, that is, I was trying to learn the answer to my question by beating about the bush.

"He has always had it. I had believed it to be a birthmark until—until that morning in July—it was a few days after the lawyer's visit—when Duarte came to me and told me that I was never to tell anyone or so much as think even to myself what that mark had been like. He had destroyed it, you see."

"Since he is dead what can it matter if you reveal this secret?" I returned.

She raised her plump hands in protest. "Do not ask me. My lips are sealed."

A call for help from the direction of the kitchen sent her flying down the hall. Seeing that I had little chance of extracting information from her, I gave up the project and bent my gaze upon the picture in my hand. A beautiful young woman, Judith had labeled the pictured face. She had been niggardly of her praise. I had no words to describe even to myself its wondrous beauty. A radiant face it was, with a perfection of outline and a symmetry of features seldom seen in a human countenance; an oval face beneath a crown of dead-black hair, a pair of deep, lustrous brown eyes so dark as to be almost black, a mouth of surpassingly beautiful curve; not a Madonna face, but a face alive, exuberant, sparkling with the very joy of being alive.

I turned the photograph over in a sort of stupor. On the back was written in a fine hand in Italian,

"Yours till death, Nita."

Who was she? And where had Ramalho known her? Could it be that this was Dolores Castro? I repudiated the thought even as it took form in my mind. I had seen the dancer's picture in the paper the previous Sunday. Beside this photograph Dolores Castro's claim to beauty faded as the mist before the sun.

I carried the photograph to McKelvie. For a long time he studied it—coolly and critically. When he spoke his words were a shock to me.

"This does not happen to be a photograph of the Contessa di Sforza, does it?" he demanded.

"The Contessa—" I was so indignant that I could only sputter. "You don't meant to say that you thought— Good heavens, she's above such an action—Why she——"

"A natural mistake," he interposed testily. "She was described to me by you as being—well, I can't possibly paint her in as glowing terms. Nita is also her name; she is Italian, and she knew Ramalho in Paris."

I cooled down. "I have never seen that face before," I said, more connectedly, referring to the picture. "It is not the countess. There is no resemblance whatsoever between them. This one's type of beauty is more delicate, more exquisitely perfect, whereas the countess ensnares one's senses and robs one of the power to think coherently."

The twinkle that was never absent long from those keen eyes deepened. "I did not know that you were a connoisseur of woman's beauty, Professor. Appearances are deceptive. You have not the look of a 'gay dog.' "

"All beauty, whether it be in a woman's face or in

the line of a poem or in the turn of a vase, appeals to me, Mr. McKelvie. I am not a connoisseur, except in matters pertaining to objects of virtu. I deal only in antiques," I replied seriously.

"Perhaps it's just as well, Professor," he returned gravely, though I know that he was inwardly amused. "I should be tempted to correct you, otherwise, and say that in my humble opinion this lady in the picture is also possessed of the passionate type of beauty. However, that's neither here nor there. We will show the portrait to the lawyer. He may be able to help us. In the meantime what have you learned concerning the tattoo?" went on McKelvie, essentially practical.

I gave him the gist of my conversation with Tom's wife, and he received it in frowning silence.

"A birthmark, did she say? Humph, if Ramalho has carried the tattoo all these years that rather throws out our theory that he effaced it because he had been false to a trust entered into with several other men." He pondered a while. "I'd be willing to wager that these two deaths are connected."

"How can they be unless Parrish killed both men," I objected.

"It can't be coincidence," he asserted. "I'm sick of that word. And yet, I'd swear that Parrish isn't guilty this time." He shook his head in puzzled wonderment. "But we are wasting precious time. Let us

carry out our original intention. Where does this alley lead?"

He pocketed the picture and swung open the iron door, giving us an unobstructed view of a dirty squalid alley lined with dirty tumbledown shacks, the negro quarters for that district.

"The alley leads to the Senador Vergueiro, about a block away," I replied to his question.

"I'm afraid that's Greek to me. How can I get to the American Consulate?"

"By taking a street-car, or by commandeering Tom's Rolls-Royce," I returned, certain that he would choose the latter.

"Forward then. I've been aching to ride in a bond (isn't that what the trams are called?) ever since my arrival."

He followed me along the alley like a school-boy on a lark, seeming to have entirely forgotten the grim task upon which he was engaged. Nor would he permit me to recall it to him.

"Time enough to resume that trend of thought when we reach the Consulate," was the only answer he vouchsafed me and I envied him his ability to detach his mind from a subject at will.

When we emerged from the alley we turned west for a block and boarded a passing car. McKelvie insisted on paying the fare and bestowed with great care in his

wallet as souvenirs the small brown and white coupons which he obtained in exchange from the conductor as receipts. When we alighted he complained that the ride was all too short and grumbled about being hurried when there was no necessity for it. I wondered if we had made a mistake to employ this man? He was so joyously young swinging along beside me with his straw hat in his hand and his dark head bared to the warm breeze that came to us laden with the fragrance of flowering trees. So far we had accomplished nothing. Was he able to cope with so great a responsibility? Would he penetrate to the bottom of this mystery or would we have to secure the aid of an older man? The moment we crossed the threshold of the Consulate my fears vanished like darkness before the dawn of a new day, for his whole demeanor changed, his eyes assumed a serious aspect and he stepped forward and inquired for Neville St. John with an air of authority which would brook no denial.

We were shown instantly into an inner office where the blonde young giant sat at ease with his heels on a level with his head. At our entrance he lowered his feet and rose to greet us. I introduced McKelvie to him and the two men bowed ceremoniously to each other. Despite the fact that he was an American, McKelvie seemed to have adopted the continental fashion of bowing rather than shaking hands when presented.

Before we parted to go our separate ways I asked him his reason for rejecting this friendly and pleasant custom of his native land and he gave me the following motive:

"When I'm engaged on a case I can have no idea who the criminal may be. I may meet him personally. Again I may not. I do not care to shake hands with murderers, therefore the easiest way out for all concerned is the one I have adopted. I make it a practice never to clasp the hand of anyone with whom I am not personally acquainted. Thus I offend no one's sensibilities and still retain my own self-respect."

But to return to the subject in hand.

Though I had been conscious as I entered that St. John looked moody and would hāve preferred his solitude to our presence, yet with true southern hospitality, the young man put himself out to make us feel at home. He pushed over cigars and cigarettes, and also ordered liquid refreshments, saying that it was a mighty hot day and that we looked parched after our walk. As we were in what the Brazilians term their winter but what we would be more apt to call spring weather, I shrewdly divined that St. John was using us as an excuse for drowning his troubles, whatever they might be, in something more lethean than water; for neither McKelvie nor I had noticed the heat, nor could I exactly consider myself as having reached the point

where I could not survive another moment without assuaging my thirst.

All this platitudinous reasoning, however, did not prevent me from accepting the cocktail which he mixed with a practiced hand. As I drained my glass it occurred to me to wonder why St. John had not been around to see his sister since the murder. A want of brotherly affection and certainly a want of courtesy toward the girl whom he evidently desired to marry.

"And, now, what can I do for you, gentlemen?" inquired St. John, politely.

"Mr. St. John," began McKelvie as he watched the other light a cigarette, "you are aware of course of the murder of your brother-in-law?"

"Yes, I learned of it only to-day. But you are not drinking anything, sir. Have I made it too weak for your taste?" The duties of hospitality claimed St. John's entire attention.

"Thank you. I do not indulge. I am quite comfortable. Pray do not bother about me," protested McKelvie. "You learned of the murder to-day? It is already two days old, Mr. St. John."

St. John stretched his long legs out in front of him and contemplated the points of his white oxfords as he replied, "I've been away from Rio. Only got back last night. I called on Judith this morning and she told me about it. A shocking affair, gentlemen. I can't imagine

who could have done it." He spoke easily with just the proper amount of regret in his slow speech that such a calamity should have occurred. It was evident that Ramalho's death was of itself no grief to him.

"I have been asked to investigate the case for Mr. Clinton," resumed McKelvie. "Under the circumstances I trust that you will see your way clear to answering a few questions."

"At your service, sir, entirely."

"You called on your sister the afternoon of the murder, did you not? That is, you talked with her in the garden?"

"Yes, I was with her about fifteen minutes."

"I understand that your conversation had to do with Ramalho and your sister's unhappiness?"

St. John got slowly to his feet, his blue eyes blazing, his big hands doubled. "Who gave you leave to pry into my sister's private affairs?" he exclaimed wrathfully. "Get out before I throw you out!"

"St. John!" I cried out, involuntarily, aghast at his rudeness, but McKelvie only laughed and said cynically the while he fixed his keen black eyes on the other's flushed and angry countenance, "My dear Professor, don't excite yourself. Evidently in Mr. St. John's category there are no gentlemen born in the United States north of the Mason and Dixon line."

St. John had the grace to look ashamed of himself.

He should have had the wit to see that McKelvie was as far above the type of Paul Pry detectives as a gentleman is above the product of the streets. "I beg your pardon," he returned stiffly. "I spoke overhastily. It's a family matter and I naturally do not care to have my sister's troubles aired before the world."

McKelvie's fine lip lifted ever so slightly. "You exaggerate. Your sister herself told me whatever I know concerning her unfortunate marriage and I assure you it will go no further," he ended, seriously.

St. John resumed his seat. "I'm an ass. If you'll go ahead, I'll do my best to answer your questions. Did I understand you to hint that Judith and I discussed her husband the afternoon of the murder?"

McKelvie inclined his dark head.

St. John frowned. "I want to be frank with you to make amends," he said. "Don't think me unchivalrous but we did not discuss Duarte at our meeting. Judith has never spoken to me of her marriage. She was too proud to confess her unhappiness to me."

McKelvie looked across at me significantly. If Judith fabricated a part of her testimony, then why not all of it? I was becoming hopelessly lost in a maze of tortuous paths.

"When you left your sister you came straight home without having seen Ramalho or threatened to kill him?" continued McKelvie.

"Yes, but wait. When I reached the gate a boy came up to me and handed me a package, quite a small package. I turned it over and saw that it was addressed to Duarte Ramalho. Not wishing to deliver it in person I rang the door-bell and handed the parcel to Cesario with instructions to give it to Duarte. After that I went home, nor have I been near the house until this morning."

"And you have no idea what was in the package? Or where it came from?"

"None at all. The address was typed," was the ready answer.

"Where were you the night of the murder between seven and eight?"

St. John played with the paper-cutter on his desk for several minutes and his action reminded me of the moment when Judith had bent the fatal dagger in her own firm white fingers which resembled so closely her brother's. At length he raised his head and met McKelvie's eyes squarely.

"I can't tell you where I was, but I give you my word of honor that I did not kill Duarte," he said.

McKelvie accepted the statement upon its face value, and his next question was a surprise to me.

"There is one more detail which I should like to have. You may answer or not as you see fit. Is there

anyone who wanted to marry your sister before she met Ramalho?"

Again St. John hesitated, then he assented frankly enough. "Why, yes. Years ago she was engaged to a young southern medical student, named James Bentley. It was a boy and girl affair. They quarreled and I have not laid eyes on him in three years. The last I heard of him he had a fine practice in New York and had become an extremely popular young surgeon."

"Thank you." McKelvie rose and I followed suit.

"If I can help you in any way—" hinted St. John as we left.

"I'll call upon you," responded McKelvie, politely. When we were once more upon the street and out of earshot of the Consulate, he added, "Fiery young cub. Do you think now that Judith is shielding her brother?"

I shook my head sorely puzzled. "What about that package, Mr. McKelvie. I suspect from the description that it contained the ivory skull."

"Very probably, which proves that St. John's having given it to Ramalho was, as I said, simply coincidence. Cesario no doubt told his master that the package came from St. John and that was why Ramalho was led to believe that his brother-in-law might be connected also with the affair of the skull."

"And you don't think he is?"

"No, I am sure he is not. He was telling the truth

about the parcel. We can safely cross him off our list of suspects," returned McKelvie with a smile for my worried expression.

"He gave you no alibi," I replied, unconvinced, my mind engaged with a vision of those fingers toying absently with the paper-cutter. And the man was a giant for strength too. He could have carried Ramalho with no more trouble than he would have Ricardo. I was brought back sharply to plain reality by McKelvie's amused tones.

"He didn't need an alibi, Professor. He's right-handed and he doesn't smoke Russian cigarettes."

CHAPTER XIII

THE LAWYER'S STORY

"As long as we are downtown, Professor, and we still have time before dinner," remarked McKelvie, consulting his watch, "would it be trespassing too much upon your good-nature to ask you to accompany me to the office of the lawyer whom Judith mentioned? Santiago, she said his name was, did she not? I have a great desire to know who the original of that picture may be."

"So have I," I responded. "We are within walking distance of his office, and far from trespassing, I should be highly incensed if you left me behind."

He laughed. "I feel like a kid tied to his mother's apron strings. I daren't move through the intricacies of the language without you, Professor. There is no danger that I shall lose you."

As before, now that his course of action was mapped out, McKelvie laid aside all thoughts of the tragedy and we discussed various idle matters as we crossed the Largo da Carioca with its old stone reservoir studded

with large brass faucets from which was drawn the water for the town in the olden days. What a picturesque scene that must have been to watch; the women, in gayly colored garments, brown-skinned, lithe, graceful with the terra-cotta jars upon their heads, the men, big, brawny, bare-armed, driving donkeys laden with cans into which to draw the precious sparkling fluid! But all that was done away with long ago and the reservoir remains as a reminder, a solitary souvenir of days that are no more. So quickly does each succeeding generation's ideas and customs supplant those of previous centuries.

I pointed out the platitudinous thought to McKelvie, but it left him cold.

"Old-fashioned things are good, no doubt, but I'll warrant that if you had to draw your water from a reservoir day after day, rain or shine, in heat and in cold, you would not find it quite so picturesque," was the scoffing rejoinder.

I dropped the subject. Our views and outlook upon the world in general were too antipodal to become reconciled. I did not attempt to convert him. I merely took him to the entrance of the Ouvidor and let the charm of this age-old street preach to him instead.

"What a quaint, old place!" he exclaimed, involuntarily, carried out of himself by the old-world aspect

of the street before him. "I haven't seen anything like that since I was last abroad."

"There is nothing like it anywhere else," I responded.

And there is not, for there is nothing orderly about the Ouvidor. Like Topsy, it just grew whither and how it pleased, a narrow, roughly paved street with buildings of every conceivable architecture that seemed to lean toward each other in a friendly conspiracy to shut out the glare and heat of the tropical sun. Dating from Colonial days the Ouvidor remains as the fashionable shopping district of Rio. Here no vehicles of any kind are allowed and at any hour of the day one may see throngs of well-dressed pedestrians of all nationalities passing up and down in a continuous stream that overflows the narrow pavements and takes as kindly to the street itself. Here women pause to chat with friends, or men stop to discuss business; hucksters cry their wares, and shops ply their trade—everyone smiling, contented, prosperous, a panorama of light and shade and varying color only appreciated by one standing in a balconied window of any second floor.

The lawyer whom we sought had his offices over a china store through which we passed to a flight of stairs at the rear. There are no elevators in the Ouvidor. We mounted the stairs to the second floor and entered a small outer office where a young law-clerk

was sleepily droning to himself over a musty volume. At sight of us he rose with relief visible in his heavy eyes. He took the card I extended toward him, and vanished into the inner sanctum. An interminable wait during which I noticed how thick the film of dust which lay upon the book-shelves and how desolate the sound of McKelvie's steps upon the bare floor as though we were the first clients to disturb that ancient quiet that seemed to brood over the room; and then the young man reappeared to say that Senhor Santiago would receive us. He held the door open for us to pass through, then reluctantly closed it behind us, shutting himself out from participation in our conference. When the door was shut tight against further intrusion, Santiago emerged from behind a large desk very much as Neptune is said to rise from the sea, an old man with a flowing white beard and merry brown eyes, the eyes of youth in the wrinkled face of a sage. I was conscious of the guilty feeling that we had interrupted his mid-afternoon nap.

"In what way can I serve you, Professor Potter?" he inquired politely in very good English, glancing from my card to ourselves, undecided which to address.

I hastened to set him right and presented McKelvie. Then we got down to business. McKelvie produced the photograph and explained how he had obtained it

and repeated everything that Judith had told us concerning its effect on her husband.

The lawyer accepted the picture and examined it attentively. "I'm afraid I shall have to disappoint you," he said presently to my companion. "I have no idea who the lady is. I have never seen this photograph before and yet—it reminds me of someone." He knit his brows in an effort to recall the elusive memory, then he shook his head. "I can't place it," he said, regretfully.

"Now that you speak of it," I interposed, "the picture also reminds me of someone, but whom I don't know; someone I have seen recently, I am sure."

McKelvie looked at us as though he thought we were a couple of dunder-heads, then he again addressed Santiago.

"You may not know who the original of this picture is, but you do know how it came into your possession. Are you willing to tell me just what your connection has been with this affair?"

"But, certainly. There is no reason why I should not. My trust ended when I placed the lacquer box in Ramalho's hands," returned the lawyer, obligingly. "Let me see—it was two years ago that a man came into my office—a man of middle-height, slender, of some thirty-six years, quiet, good-looking with brown

eyes and very black hair, in fact, a gentleman and a Brazilian——"

At this point I interrupted him to exclaim in amazement, "Benjamin Garcia!"

McKelvie glanced at me quickly with questioning eyes and I nodded emphatically. The lawyer smiled.

"You know him, then? He gave me no name, so that I cannot say whether you are right or not. He handed me a lacquer box, and explained that its contents were of great importance; in fact, so valuable that he desired them to be well guarded until such time as Ramalho came into the inheritance. I was not to let anyone know of the existence of the box unless a certain event came to pass."

He opened a drawer, took out a file and hunted through it until he found the paper which he sought.

"On the day that I received from him a cablegram worded in a certain way, I was to take the box to Ramalho. Toward the end of June, I received the following—and I carried out all instructions to the letter."

He extended the cablegram and McKelvie and I bent over it eagerly.

"Do everything as told here. Take box Ramalho July 3." The cablegram was unsigned.

"How did you know that the cablegram came from the right person?" I inquired, as McKelvie continued to study the message.

"He had agreed with me as to the form of wording. He also told me it would be sent in English," replied the lawyer.

"Why?" asked McKelvie, laying the cablegram on the desk.

"I do not know—unless he desired no one but myself to know its contents."

"Did you not think this man's request a strange one? Did you make no attempt to learn something of his antecedents and who he was before accepting this trust?" queried McKelvie. "How did you know that it would be to Ramalho's interest to receive this box?"

The lawyer raised deprecating hands. "To understand my motive, Mr. McKelvie, I should be forced to bore you with the Ramalho family history," he said.

"I do not think you will bore us, Senhor," returned McKelvie, quietly.

"As you wish. About forty-one years ago Manoel Ramalho, the father of Duarte, went to Paris to study art. For ten years he remained abroad and nothing was heard from him. Then unexpectedly he turned up in Rio with a six-months-old son. He let it be known that he was a widower and intrusted the child to his sister. A year later, however, he married a Brazilian girl of wealth and by that marriage he had two daughters, Helena and Maria Theresa."

"So Duarte Ramalho was only a step-brother of Mrs. Clinton's," commented McKelvie. "I had rather imagined from what Professor Potter said that Ramalho was younger than his sister."

"No, he was about three years older, but he was very irresponsible, a social butterfly, fond of a good time just like his father before him," answered the lawyer. "When the father died, it was discovered that his money had been pretty well squandered and there was nothing much for the children. But Helena had married well, and so, of course, the others were cared for."

He shrugged and resumed. "The father never said so, but I always had a sneaking suspicion that his first wife was a Parisian. When this unknown man came to my office two years ago he explained that he represented relatives of this lady and that the box was an inheritance which would belong to Duarte in the course of time. He asked me to keep the box to prevent its falling into the hands of avaricious relatives. So I accepted the trust."

"Did you know what the box contained?"

"No, it was locked."

"And this man gave you no inkling of the contents?"

"No. I inferred that it contained jewels," replied the lawyer. "You told me, did you not, that the photograph was in it?"

"Yes, that and some letters."

The lawyer stroked his beard. "I can't understand why this man should stress the value of a few letters and a picture. You are certain there were no jewels?"

"No, I am not certain. I was not interested in the box itself, but in what those letters may have contained," responded McKelvie, rising. "Thank you for your consideration in receiving us, Senhor," he added as we took our leave.

The merry brown eyes twinkled kindly at us. "If I can serve you again, please call on me," bowed the sage.

Downstairs McKelvie paused beside a counter tastefully displaying chinese ware. Among the jars and trays was a match-holder representing a mask of death. McKelvie picked it up and spoke in an undertone as he pretended to admire it.

"Did you notice anything queer about that cablegram?" he asked.

"Queer? No, I can't say that I did. The only thought that occurred to me was that it must have been rather expensive to send," I returned in the same guarded tones for which I could see no particular motive since we were conversing in English.

"Yes, that was it. The last five words would have been explicit enough. So I took the trouble to study those first five. Do you know what they spelled?"

And when I shook my head, he held out the match-holder. "This is what they spelled," he said.

I thought he had gone suddenly daft. How could five cabled words spell a match-holder? Seeing my expression, he put down the object and took from his pocket a pencil and his card. On the back he scribbled a few words and then passed it to me. This is what I saw:

Do Everything As Told Here. D E A T H.

"Do you get it now? It spelled death. I wonder whether the old chap upstairs knew that?" he questioned. "Turn your back to the stairs and employ yourself admiring the glassware. Here he comes now."

We ensconced ourselves behind some tall vases and out of the tail of my eye I awaited the lawyer's advent. To my surprise the sleepy-looking clerk sauntered idly by toward the door. Instantly McKelvie made after him with me in tow. We could just discern the lanky form darting in and out of the crowd and we quickened our pace to keep him in view. I had no idea why McKelvie deemed it necessary to follow the clerk who had not the appearance of one sufficiently wide-awake to know what was taking place around him; but I kept my eyes riveted on that lean figure, determined that it should be through no fault of mine if we should lose sight of the quarry. And just as the resolution crossed

my mind, he turned a corner and vanished as though the earth had opened and swallowed him up.

McKelvie was not in the least upset by this miraculous disappearance. He drew me aside and we stood looking in at the window of a store on the Carioca until a satisfied nod told me that my companion had learned whatever it was that he hoped to discover.

"He has just left his burrow; in other words, that telegraph office on the corner. We will now go over and see what he was up to," remarked McKelvie in a cheerful voice.

"So that is what became of him," I returned inanely. "To whom do you suppose he has seen fit to send a message?"

"If I knew I should not be putting myself to the inconvenience of finding out. By the way, we will use the chief of police's card and you will doubtless have to translate the message for me."

He gave me the card and entering the office I handed it to the operator, telling him that I desired to see the telegram that had just been handed in. The man behind the desk made no demur. He removed a sheet of paper from a pile before him and laid it on the counter. I took in the message at a single glance.

"Well?" demanded McKelvie impatiently, as I stood and stared at the paper before me.

"It reads, 'The hounds are on the scent. Shall I

draw a red herring across the trail?' " I returned. "It is signed 'Niccolo.' "

"And to whom is it addressed?"

"Why, to Gilbert Parrish in Petropolis," I answered, slowly.

CHAPTER XIV

GOMEZ'S ASSISTANT

"And now, Professor, if you will be so kind as to see me to Police Headquarters, we'll call it a day—for you," said McKelvie whimsically when we had left the telegraph office and had traversed several blocks in silence.

"You are going to consult with Diago about the telegram?" I asked with interest.

"In a way. I am going to have Parrish brought to Rio. Since the message was sent to him, he should be the one to explain its meaning to us. In the meantime I am going to work at the case from another angle. I have a feeling that James Bentley is not so far from Rio as St. John implied. I can get information about him from the police more quickly than from any other source."

"You will let me know the result?" I demanded eagerly.

"I'll do better than that. I'll take you with me when I call upon him, provided of course that my guess proves correct."

In view of which I half-expected to hear from him that evening, but when no word was forthcoming from him by eight o'clock I came to the conclusion that his deduction had proved to be founded purely on his desire to find this man rather than upon any basic reasoning from fact. But I was in error. I might have known that McKelvie's intuition would not lead him very far astray. At eight-thirty Cesario came upstairs to the studio where I was playing checkers with Tom's son and announced that Senhor McKelvie wished to see me.

When I descended to the lower hall, the young man drew me into the library and closed the door.

"Can you come calling with me to-night? We'll make it quite ceremonious and proper," he said, smiling broadly.

He was in such excellent high spirits that I jumped at once to the conclusion that he had learned something of importance.

He assented. "James Bentley is practicing medicine under the sheltering wing of a Doctor Gomez who lives a few doors from here," he began when I interrupted him.

"The birdlike doctor," I exclaimed in genuine wonderment. "What a coincidence that I should have called him in the night of the murder."

"Not coincidence, but luck. The fates smile upon

us. Since you know him we shall not have to be quite so ceremonious after all. But come, I'll tell you what I have learned as we walk over."

I secured my top-hat and gloves and followed McKelvie through the sweet-scented garden to the gate where he paused to draw my attention to the perfection of the evening. The poignancy, the nearness of the beauty of the tropics grips one, compelling one to pause and admire, too strong to be ever completely ignored.

It was a pleasantly warm, star-lit night with a gentle breeze stirring the leaves of the trees behind us and wafting to us the intoxicating perfumed breath of myriad blossoms. Across the way the lights of Nictheroy winked feebly back at the brilliant lamps that girt the shore, while between them like a lake of glass lay the smooth dark waters of the bay.

McKelvie drew a long breath. "No wonder passions run high in this land of beauty and enchantment; that a woman's smile can make or mar the life of a man. A night like this and the irresistible charm of a beautiful woman and what chance would a man have against such a combination? Is it the heat? I vow the blood is whipping through my veins at twice its normal rate this minute." He removed his hat and mopped his damp brow.

I couldn't help smiling. "It's a good thing, then, that we are not calling on a lady," I remarked. "In

your present romantic state you might find yourself caught in the meshes of matrimony."

His eyes twinkled maliciously. "When I call on the Countess, Professor, I shall go in the daytime and wear smoked glasses. I advise you to do the same, for if I am any judge of men, you are in far more danger than I."

I felt myself blushing, for subconsciously the countess had been in my thoughts from the moment that I first laid eyes on her; I spoke curtly. "If we are going to call on Gomez we had better be starting." I walked on, anxious to hide my confusion from the scrutiny of those sharp eyes.

"And I promised to regale you with Bentley's private history," he returned, catching up to me. "Six months ago the St. Johns came to Rio upon the appointment of their father as American Consul. Judith was married a month later. Either Ramalho was a fascinating wooer or else she was glad to accept him out of pique. I'm going to wager that she wanted to show James Bentley that he wasn't the only pebble on the beach. About a month ago the latter came to Brazil and offered himself as assistant to Doctor Gomez. That is all the police know, but recalling St. John's statement we are free to make a few deductions. Tell me this. Why should Bentley give up a lucrative practice in New York

to come to a foreign country and play second fiddle to another physician?"

"The obvious answer is that he followed in Judith's footsteps."

"He must have known that she was married and therefore lost to him since Ramalho's religion would forbid a divorce," continued McKelvie, thoughtfully. "I'll have to have a better reason than that, Professor."

"He may have been very much in love with her and may have felt that he could never be happy unless he could see her occasionally," I opined.

He held up the suggestion to scorn. "You are hopelessly old-fashioned. Such romantic rubbish is out of date. Besides, mankind is fundamentally selfish. No man would act as you presuppose without an ulterior motive," he retorted.

"I should," I replied with some dignity, "and I have faith to believe that there are others who are not wholly materialistic."

He laughed. "Is that an accusation? But I am not altogether a worshiper of Baal. The fault lies in the fact that I see so much that is unworthy in human nature that faith has become gradually weakened. But we won't quarrel over my attitude. We have too much at stake at present. To get back to our discussion. Since you claim that Bentley has never been near the

house, must we then assume a clandestine affair between Judith and this man?"

"Good heavens, no. Judith is an honorable girl!"

"And yet, she is lying to save him," put in McKelvie, frowning. "It's an odd situation. We will have a chance to discuss it more intelligently after our interview."

We turned into the doctor's garden and approached the door of his house which stood hospitably open. At our knock a dusky maid ushered us into a small reception-room under the impression no doubt that we were prospective patients. The next moment the little doctor came hurrying toward us, looking more like a robin than ever in his tail-coat as he took several short steps with his head thrust forward and then halted with a jerk before us.

"Senhor Potter, this is an unexpected pleasure." The bright little eyes were cocked on my companion's face as the doctor bowed to us. I presented McKelvie, whereupon the little man was quite overcome with the honor of having so distinguished a caller, or so he conveyed to McKelvie in his proper English. All of which McKelvie accepted complacently as his due.

"You wish to consult me about this shocking affair?" asked the doctor presently when we were comfortably seated. He was shrewd enough to realize that we had

not called upon him merely for the sake of enjoying his society.

"I came, Doctor, to consult your assistant, James Bentley," responded McKelvie.

The doctor leaned closer. "You are a swift worker, Mr. McKelvie, to have learned already that James knows something of importance. But if you can get anything out of him you will be doing well. He has been acting very strangely since that night, nor will he say where he was." He rose and went toward the door. "I'll ask him to come in for a moment."

"One word before you summon him," interposed McKelvie quickly. "Why did he offer himself to you, Doctor? You are clever enough to know that he is not just beginning the practice of medicine," he intimated in a flattering voice.

The doctor perched on the threshold for a reply, a smile of pleasure on his gypsy face. "He is really quite a well-known surgeon in your country, Mr. McKelvie. Some time ago he injured the muscles of his hand during an operation, the slip of a knife, I believe, and since then he has been unable to carry on his chosen profession. He was ordered to go abroad and rest. He told me he could not bear to be idle and would be glad to render me such assistance as lay within his power. My practice is larger than I can well handle alone. I accepted his offer."

"Thank you. I will see him, now, if you please."

When the doctor had gone I turned to McKelvie with something like triumph for a vindicated ideal in my glance. "Where is your fine theory of ulterior motive, now, Mr. McKelvie? He came to Brazil instead of going abroad because Judith drew him to this part of the world."

"Not proven, for she was a secondary motive," he replied. "It was accident, not Judith, that caused him to leave New York. And we still have to show that there is no agreement between them. Now I wonder what he can know of this murder. Being a Southerner, he'll be closer than a clam, especially if his knowledge concerns the girl. It's up to me to see how well I can beat him at his own game." He broke off abruptly as Gomez returned followed by James Bentley.

A tall thin chap on the sunny side of thirty with a long mournful countenance and restless brown eyes, the doctor's assistant was none too pleased to meet us. He nodded stiffly as he was introduced and seated himself ungraciously at Gomez's urgent request. He would have preferred, I think, to pace the room.

I wondered how McKelvie would begin the attack. A flank movement was his method of opening the battle of wits between them. He drew out his cigarette case and offered it to Bentley. The latter stretched forth a long thin hand to help himself, then as if he had

changed his mind, he said, somberly, "I only smoke one brand, thank you."

"Russian?" It was a long shot but it told.

Bentley nodded and shrugged. "I left my case upstairs, so will have to forego the pleasure for the time being."

"A good thing," retorted Gomez. "He smokes entirely too much. I don't think he realizes half the time that he is doing it and it's making him as nervous as a cat."

The brown eyes moved questingly from object to object around the room but the man made no counter remark. McKelvie continued.

"Doctor Bentley, without doubt Doctor Gomez has told you that I am investigating the circumstances of Ramalho's death. All the evidence points strongly in one direction——"

"She didn't do it," Bentley interrupted fiercely, his face working. "She didn't do it, I tell you. I know she didn't do it." He was so vehement that he sounded like a man who is trying to convince himself of the truth of his own statement.

"That is your belief. The dagger is hers; she was unhappy; she wanted to marry you——"

"Who told you that!" The words leaped unbidden to the surface, and a light like the dawning of hope irradiated his countenance, lifting the gloom.

"I deduced it. What proof have you to offer that she did not kill her husband?" interjected McKelvie sharply, extinguishing by his words the radiance of Bentley's face.

"She is incapable——'

"In a moment of passion one is capable of undreamed-of actions," retorted the other.

Bentley got to his feet, his hands clenched, his brows drawn together in sullen defiance. "I've got one proof. Judith is left-handed. The blow was struck by a right-handed person," he said slowly.

I gazed at him as though I thought he had taken leave of his senses, and indeed he looked the madman with his hair awry and that wild expression in his eyes. I saw Gomez lift his hands as much as to say, "I might have known it would lead to this"; and I noted his air of bewilderment when McKelvie spoke to the young surgeon as if he believed his statement the acme of logical reasoning.

"You are a doctor and I presume you can back your remark. Would you mind explaining to me how you arrived at this conclusion of yours which if it be correct throws out entirely the testimony of the police physician on that point?"

"Yes," said Bentley harshly, "I can prove it. Penna is a good doctor, but he's not a surgeon. I had a talk with him on this very subject. He claims that the knife

slanted to the right and that therefore it must have been wielded by the left hand. The conclusion does not follow from the premise. The slant of the weapon depends entirely upon the respective positions of the murderer and his victim." He paused to glance at McKelvie. Finding that the other was giving him his undivided attention, Bentley went on. "Suppose the two had been standing so that the murderer struck from a sidewise position with his right hand, so," he swung his arm from right to left in illustration, "then the dagger would have gone in on the slant and it would have pointed toward the right."

McKelvie protested vigorously. "You are wrong. A sidewise blow such as you describe would have no great force. Besides, it is too awkward. The blow was struck direct, and with a good deal of power back of it, Penna said."

"A large man could have struck the way I described. He might even have had his left arm around his victim's shoulder to lull suspicion," insisted Bentley.

"You might as well give it up, Mr. McKelvie," interposed Gomez resignedly. "On that point he is pigheadedly stubborn and will not budge an inch."

"Why should I? Does anyone know how the two were standing? Of course not, since there were no eyewitnesses. Until we definitely prove that they were facing each other my argument is as good as the next

man's and I'm going to stick to it. Besides, Ramalho was not killed by the dagger found on the table. That dagger was in my possession at the time of the murder." He spoke defiantly, daring us to contradict him if we could.

McKelvie looked up sharply. "Just what do you mean?"

"I called on Judith the afternoon of the murder. I know I had no right to but I was parched for a sight of her and so—I defied convention. She was in the arbor, reading. The sight of me startled her; she dropped her book. Later when she had gone back to the house I found the dagger on the ground. I put it mechanically in my pocket." He paused to take a fresh grip upon his emotions, then continued glumly: "When dinner was over I went for a walk. My steps carried me to Judith's house. I had the dagger with me. It was valuable and I decided to return it before she discovered her loss. I passed through the garden and seeing a light in the library I stepped in. The room was empty. I laid the dagger on the table and hurried away."

"What time was this?"

"About eight-ten or at most eight-fifteen," he replied, thickly.

There was a moment's tense silence broken by Mc-

Kelvie's terse tones. "How do you account for the blood on the hilt?"

Doctor Bentley's eyes came to rest on McKelvie's face, wavered and moved on to the open window, which seemed to beckon him, for he approached it and stood leaning against the jamb as one in need of a draft of air to cool his fevered brow.

"I had cut my finger during the day. In putting on my gloves the wound opened and bled a little. I handled the dagger with that hand," he answered with difficulty.

"You have given me something to think about at any rate," said McKelvie presently when the silence threatened to become oppressive. "Two more questions and I'll cease to bother you. Did you see the Senhora Ramalho this afternoon?"

Bentley's face darkened as he swung toward us again, then it cleared. "I called on Judith merely to tender my sympathies," he replied briefly.

"Who suggested that you meet in the arbor?"

"That is a question that I do not choose to answer," was the haughty assertion.

A slight movement of McKelvie's lips indicated that the question had been answered very satisfactorily. Then we rose to take our leave. Outside the doctor's gate, McKelvie shook his head.

"That's a clever young man. I wish I had had the

chance to view the body. One can't put one's trust in the evidence of another's eyes. Now I wonder which doctor is in the right?"

"What about the dagger? Do you think he was telling the truth?" I inquired.

"He's no fool, that is certain. But you can answer that question better than I. Was the dagger on the table before dinner?"

"As surely as I'm standing here," I affirmed. I was not mistaken; on that point I was willing to swear if necessary.

McKelvie raised his brows significantly. "Men in love are mad sometimes. He has probably rehearsed an alibi for her to the extent that now he believes in it as a reality."

"Why did you not end his misery, then, and tell him that she is innocent?" I demanded.

"I'm playing them one against the other. I wanted to find out what was on his mind. But there is Diago's car. He promised to pick me up. I'll phone you in the morning if I need you. In the meantime here is something to think about. Did you notice that Bentley stretched out his left hand for the cigarette? His right is practically useless."

Now what did McKelvie mean by that remark? It was not until I was turning in at Tom's gate that the significance of the statement came over me. I had

thought that Bentley was exercised over the question of the kind of thrust administered purely on Judith's account. Now I realized that it was on his own. If his right hand was useless, he was to all intents and purposes left-handed. Add to that the fact that he smoked Russian cigarettes, was foolish enough to admit that the weapon was in his possession at the time and refused to tell Gomez where he had been that night and one could build a pretty strong case against him. Why hadn't McKelvie questioned him more closely? It seemed to me that the former had been negligently neglectful of an opportunity. Or had he been afraid of putting Bentley on his guard?

CHAPTER XV

THE ARREST

THE very next morning I had an unexpected visitor. I was at work in the library when Cesario came in to say that a lady was waiting to see me. Knowing but one lady outside the family, I was not surprised to discover that my fair caller was the beautiful countess. She extended her hand with an imperious gesture and when I had bent over it and murmured that I was delighted to see her, she broke into fiery speech in rapid French. Her English was inadequate to do the subject full justice.

"Professor Potter, *ma foi,* what do you think these imbeciles have done!" she exclaimed angrily. "They have arrested him, my husband, my Gilbert. They say he killed Duarte Ramalho." She laughed scornfully. "Does a man kill his best friend, I ask you? Oh, the imbeciles, the idiots!" She was walking up and down the reception-room like a caged lioness.

"My dear countess," I returned, more taken aback by the news of her marriage than by that of the arrest,

"pray be calm. Won't you be seated? I can help you only when I know the whole story from the beginning."

She beat her hands together excitedly. "Be calm? But I can't be calm. They have arrested him, I tell you. Does not that mean anything to you?"

"It means that he is in jail," I replied prosaically. "But I cannot release him. Why have you appealed to me?"

"The police say I must have an order of release from an American detective who has charge of the case. You are American and they say you know him. You can ask him to let Gilbert go." She glided up to me and took my hand. "Have you no heart, Monsieur?" she asked in a softly, pleading voice. "We were just married. They have spoilt our honeymoon. Surely you will have him released, will you not?" She gave me a melting glance from those glorious eyes that set my pulses to stirring strangely and I, Professor Potter, old bachelor that I was, pushed aside the terrifying thought that she was married to this man, lifted her hand to my lips and pledged myself to her service, stumblingly, like a callow youth in the first crude moments of infatuation.

She rewarded me with a smile which meant that everything was happily arranged and I hastened to disabuse her mind of any such notion.

"Mr. McKelvie is unfortunately a rather unsenti-

mental young man," I explained. "He may not be so anxious to serve you as I am."

She laughed. "Just leave him to me, Professor Potter," she answered confidently.

"He has no use for women," I warned her.

A flash of white teeth between parted lips showed her amusement. "You are very naïve, Professor. No man can refuse a request made to him by a beautiful woman if she knows how to use her powers. But, please, please, hurry. I can't bear to think of Gilbert locked in a horrid cell. I have a taxi waiting at the door."

I stopped long enough to apprise McKelvie by phone of our advent that we might not find him gone, and then I followed her to the waiting machine. We were strangely silent as we drove around the bay to the house of the chief of police. She was thinking of her husband and I was wondering whether I had played the fool in her eyes. So distractingly lovely was she that in the nearness of her presence I forgot everything that I should have remembered; that she was married and that her husband had taken the life of a human being.

McKelvie was waiting for us and he suggested that we drive to the station-house immediately since we could converse just as agreeably upon the way. This was said with a charming smile directed toward the countess to whom I had just presented him and who

acknowledged the introduction by following it up with subtle flattery. The male of the species is as susceptible to flattery as the female whatever he may say and think upon the subject, and when I saw how McKelvie kept his eyes on her face I recalled a certain speech of his and wished devoutly that he had provided himself with that pair of smoked glasses.

"And now, Countess, would you mind telling me how this unfortunate contretemps came about?" he asked, kindly, in French.

"Unfortunate contretemps!" Considering that he himself had ordered Parrish's apprehension, McKelvie's choice of term was just a trifle ironic.

The countess was too engrossed in her own affairs to heed any incongruity between his words and his actions. Or else she was clever enough to let him have the word as a salve to his conscience. In any event she plunged at once into an account of her trouble.

"We were married the morning of the sixteenth and went to Petropolis for our honeymoon. Last night a man came to our hotel and asked for Gilbert. We did not suspect foul play. We received the man. He pulled out an order for my husband's arrest. I would have fought against such an indignity, but Gilbert, being wiser, said no, that it was best to return to Rio peaceably. He was not guilty and could explain everything. When we got to Rio what do those idiots do? They

say they do not believe him and they lock him up! I begged and pleaded; I went down on my knees; I wept, and I tore my hair. They were adamant. I must see you, Monsieur, and secure your permission. You will release him for me, will you not?" She leaned closer and laid a hand on his, and there were actually tears in her beautiful eyes.

"When I have questioned him—not before," he said, harshly, drawing away from her as though he feared her softening influence.

She was quick to note the action and as she dabbed her eyes with a ridiculous scrap of a lace handkerchief, her lips lifted slightly at the corners in a little smile of satisfaction. He was afraid of her and she took it as a sign that she was victor. She leaned toward him again, so close this time that he could not help inhaling the fragrance of her raven hair, and she spoke enticingly in her most dulcet tones; Delilah beguiling Samson could not have attempted it more effectively. I saw him close his eyes and turn his head away as she began.

"Why do you want to question Gilbert, Mr. McKelvie? What can you hope to learn from him? He knows nothing of this murder. I swear it to you. Would he kill a man and then turn around and marry me? It is sacrilege to think it. He was with friends that night at eight. Ah, have pity upon me and let him go that we may return to Petropolis." She seemed to

be pleading for her very soul's peace as if her husband's unjust imprisonment were more than she could bear with fortitude. Suddenly she added as though struck by the thought for the first time, "Surely you, too, do not think him guilty?"

Abruptly he faced her and for a long moment he drank deep of the dark unfathomable pools that were her eyes; then he sighed. "No, Countess, I do not think him guilty—of this murder. You may have him back. I want to talk to him in a friendly way because he may be useful to me, that is all."

When he paused she shot a glance of triumph in my direction, but turned instantly to him once more as he went on to tell her of the murder of Garcia. "You have lived in Italy, Countess, and you are more familiar with its customs and manners than I. Tell me, did you ever hear of a society which has for its symbol the ivory skull?"

Under the potent spell of his voice she had been listening with dreamy eyes, her surroundings, her husband's predicament, everything forgotten. She saw and heard only the man beside her. He had beaten her at her own game for he was impervious to her wiles.

At mention of the skull she sat up and regarded him with wide-open, horrorstruck eyes. "The ivory skull," she repeated, low. "No, never." She sank into meditation from which she roused herself with an effort to

answer his question. "I do not know much of such things but I do not believe that a secret society would tattoo its members."

"Why not?" I inquired.

She gave me a sweetly, superior smile, her poise regained. "Just think for a moment, Monsieur. What comment an unusual sight such as a tattoo would raise among a man's companions. It would become bruited abroad and enemies would know how to spot their victims."

"You seem to know quite a lot about this sort of thing, Countess," I remarked sourly.

"*Mon Dieu,* Professor, I cannot live in a country where such things are frequent subjects of conversation and keep my ears sealed to shut out the knowledge. If one lives in the world, one must expect to learn all sorts of various things, both good and bad."

Whatever else she may have been going to add was indefinitely postponed by our arrival at the precinct where the *delegado* came out and handed the countess from the car the moment we drew up at the curb. They are at times too attentive, these fellows.

When we entered the outer office, McKelvie told me to ask for Parrish. At an order from the *delegado* a uniformed policeman saluted and left the room. A moment later he returned, holding the door back for Parrish who limped forward with head flung high and

a defiant look on his haggard face. At sight of his wife, however, his hostile manner vanished; his eyes lighted up, and the scar on his cheek grew crimson and throbbed like a quickened pulse. He went to her at once, murmuring some endearment the while he raised her hand to his lips; then he swung around to face McKelvie. For a space the two men so different in appearance and temperament, the one cool, self-possessed, the other, passionate, hot-headed, eyed each other in silence. When Parrish spoke his tone was bitter.

"I understand that I owe my present ignominious predicament to your instrumentality. I have had some experience with the police before. I presume it would be useless to say that I am innocent?"

"On the contrary," responded McKelvie, quietly, "for I am not affiliated with the police. I came expressly to set you at liberty. A misunderstanding was responsible for your being placed in a cell. I beg your pardon for the inconvenience to which you have been put. Before you go, however, I should like a few moments conversation with you, but not in the presence of your wife."

The countess laughed gayly. "You are afraid, Monsieur, that I shall tell him what to say," she declared playfully.

"I am afraid your beauty will steal away my wits, Countess, and make me forget what it was that I de-

sired to know," was the gallant reply from this young man who had no use for women. What would I not have given to have possessed his glib tongue.

We abandoned the countess to the mercies of the *delegado* much to that gentleman's secret delight while we gathered in an inner room, I to hear and Parrish to answer McKelvie's inquiries.

CHAPTER XVI

PARRISH'S MOTIVE

"To begin with," said McKelvie when Parrish and I were seated, "I want to tell you that I know that you were responsible for the death of Garcia over a month ago."

"Not so loud, please," begged Parrish, half starting up. "I would not have my wife know for anything in the world."

McKelvie obligingly lowered his voice. "I'm telling you this because I believe that frankness is best under the circumstances. You need have no fear, however, that I shall use the knowledge against you. Let the New York police revive the matter if they so choose."

"I thank you——"

"Don't," interjected McKelvie sharply. "I happen to believe in retributive justice."

Parrish raised his brows, undecided how to take this. When McKelvie continued silent, the other asked, "Would you mind explaining how you discovered the truth concerning my connection with the Garcia affair?"

McKelvie complied with the request, giving his

reasons for his deduction as he had already related them to me.

"You are right," answered Parrish, gloomily. "I killed him not because I wished him ill.—Good God, Mr. McKelvie, he was my brother!" he broke off, abruptly.

"Your brother?" Even McKelvie was taken aback by this revelation. "And you murdered him!"

Parrish raised his hand as though to ward off a blow. "No, not murder. I swear it was not murder," he exclaimed in agitation. "I killed him, yes—but because he made me." He buried his face in his hands and clutched wildly at his thick black hair.

"Are you mad, Mr. Parrish?" McKelvie's cool tones were incredulous.

"I sometimes think I am," was the muffled reply. "God, what I have lived through since that day!—but let me tell you my story. You can judge for yourself the extent of my guilt."

He rose and fell to pacing the stone floor while he talked. "I did not know that Garcia was my brother until he summoned me to him by cable. When my mother died we were just youngsters and as we had no kin and no means of support we were sent to an orphanage. A year later I was adopted by an American lady residing in Florence. I lost track of my brother and when years later I tried to find out what had become

of him, the asylum could give me no definite information. Then I received his cable. I came to New York and met him at the Hotel Magnificent, as you know."

"How could you be sure that the cable was from your brother and not from an impostor?" asked McKelvie.

"Because he had signed it with the childish name which I had bestowed upon him in my babyhood. No one else would know that diminutive," responded Parrish.

"Am I to understand then that Parrish is not your right name?" continued McKelvie.

"It can't be, and yet I know of no other that belongs to me. I was seven when I was adopted and though I have tried to recall I cannot remember having heard my mother's last name spoken in my presence. Perhaps it is Garcia—I do not know."

He lapsed into brooding silence from which McKelvie roused him with a start. "I am waiting for the rest of the tale, Mr. Parrish," said the latter impatiently. "You met Garcia and then?"

"And then he told me one of the strangest stories that has fallen to the lot of man to hear. I took leave to doubt him in places—I was a fool. I have had ample proof since of the truth of his remarks."

He strode to the window and back again before he continued. "He told me that our mother was Italian by birth and that she came of a race that was accursed.

Her sons were born marked. On their arms they bore the symbol of their doom—a human skull, a grinning skull maliciously foretelling of a death by violence."

Vehemently he rolled up his sleeve and displayed for our benefit upon the fleshy part above the elbow—a distended but otherwise perfect reproduction of the ivory skull which I had seen and handled!

"That is no birthmark," said McKelvie emphatically. "The design has been pricked into the skin. It has been very skillfully done."

A twisted smile touched the corners of Parrish's lips as he went on: "I had always thought it a freak of nature—a birthmark peculiar to me alone. But Garcia showed me the spot on his arm where he had succeeded in effacing the skull to such an extent that it was no longer recognizable as such. He explained that he had taken the precaution because we were accursed and he did not want the vengeance of the skull to overtake him. He begged me to do the same. I thought him mad."

"And so you refused to follow his advice?" remarked McKelvie, pointing to the tattoo.

"It wasn't that," answered Parrish in a dull voice. "I am a fatalist. What is done, is done; and what is to be, will be in spite of all our efforts to the contrary. Garcia effaced the mark. Did that prevent the curse from taking him for its victim? But where was I?

He told me that all his affairs were in order, that he had destroyed all evidence as to his true identity, which by the way he refused to reveal to me, saying that I was better off not to know, and then he showed me a card which bore the skull upon it as a symbol and the message in Italian that he had three days to live."

"If he wasn't demented, at least he was mad with fear," Parrish resumed after a slight pause. "For a month he had been receiving these cards, each one telling him how many days of life were left to him until when I saw him he was frantic. He said there was no escape from death but he had evolved a scheme by which he would cheat the avenger. He had died a thousand deaths already and he was at the end of his endurance. He was a Catholic and dared not damn his soul by committing suicide. So he prayed, he ordered, he commanded me to kill him. I refused. All through dinner he pleaded with me and throughout the walk we took afterwards. Then about eleven we returned to his room. He seemed resigned to my decision and asked me to help him pass the time with a game of cards. Though I do make a good deal of money at poker and other games, I am not a crooked gambler. I depend on my proficiency and skill entirely. We had not played one hand when he accused me of cheating. I have a vile temper. It got the better of me and before I realized what I was doing I had picked

up the steel paper-cutter from his desk and was threatening him with it. He looked into my face and laughed sneeringly. The wine I had consumed went to my brain and standing above him I drove the weapon home."

He paused to wet his dry lips. "When I saw what I had done I was in an agony of remorse, but he only smiled and said quietly, 'It was an unfair advantage I took of you, Gilbert. Forgive me but there was no other way out for me. Put the cards back where they belong and go.' In a daze I did as he bade me and it was only when I reached the street that I recalled my appointment with Vardusi."

"That was not manufactured evidence, then?" queried McKelvie with keen interest.

"That was the ironic part of the whole affair," returned Parrish with a bitter smile. "I had called Vardusi on the long-distance in the morning after I had come ashore because I had been commissioned by him to carry a message to the Italian government. It had something to do with some money he was giving them and he did not wish his name to appear in the transaction. That is why we met in secret. Any time after eleven he would be waiting for me at his house. I reached his home about a quarter to twelve and was with him at midnight. When he testified in my behalf he was absolutely honest in his conviction. It was the

doctor who was at fault in placing the crime a half hour later than it really occurred."

"How is it that the hotel clerk claimed to have seen you there at twelve-twenty?"

"I went back. I left Vardusi at twelve-five with the thought of my deed obsessing me. I had walked up one flight when it occurred to me that perhaps Garcia had already been discovered. If I were found near the scene of the crime someone might recall having seen us together. I was not really to blame for his death. I turned and fled again.

"Now I come to the part of the whole proceeding that I have never understood. Perhaps you can explain it to me. In the morning I read the account of the crime in the papers and of course when I was ordered to appear at the inquest I thought out a story which I decided to stick to no matter what happened. But that is past history. This is what troubles me. If I stabbed Garcia at eleven-thirty, how does it happen that the crime was placed at twelve and where did the brand come from? Until that awful moment at the inquest when they showed me a reproduction of the brand I had not really believed in the existence of the skull."

"To my mind the thing is simple enough, although I may be entirely at fault," responded McKelvie, "as I was in deducing Mr. Parrish's guilt from the fact that he was supposedly present at the time of the real crime,

which as it happens he was not," he added for my benefit, frankly honest with himself where he could easily have imposed upon me. "It is my opinion that the avenger was in the hotel at the time," he went on, speaking to Parrish. "He may even have had means of knowing Garcia's plans. When he saw you leave he went into Garcia's room. Any pretext would do. For a moment he thought himself cheated of his vengeance. Then he saw that you had not stabbed deep enough to kill outright. The weapon was blunt and Garcia's clothing would present a certain amount of resistance. The avenger then taunted his victim and drove the knife in deeper. That would account for the doctor's verdict and the look on Garcia's face. Then the avenger branded his victim and left the hotel, the next day probably."

Parrish nodded agreement to this explanation. "I suppose it would be as you have described. After the inquest I could not bear to stay in New York. I hated myself for what I had done. I blamed Garcia for my misery. I dreaded the moment when I too should learn that I had but a few days to live. While I was in this state of indecision I met Nita. She was sailing for Brazil at the end of July. I determined to follow her. On shipboard I might be able to forget. And the first day out, you, Professor Potter," he turned to me with the ghost of a smile, "accused me of having stolen

from you the ivory skull. What a mockery! I to steal the thing I was fleeing from! From then on, there was no more peace for me except in those moments when I was with Nita. She alone could make me forget. I avoided you as I would the plague. I believed you my enemy and your accusation a ruse to show me that there was no escape for me."

McKelvie waved aside my indignant protest. "The professor was only interested in the thing as a curio. You have heard nothing from it since you have been here?"

"Not a thing."

"You are aware of course that Ramalho's death presented similar aspects to that of Garcia?"

"I have been told the facts by the *delegado*. I did not know the man was dead until last night," responded Parrish.

"What made you call on him the afternoon of the fifteenth?"

"I had known him abroad. There was something about him that appealed to me. As he was the only person that I knew in the city I called to ask him to witness my marriage."

"You told him this?"

"Yes, and he returned that he would be delighted to support me. He seemed pleased with my good fortune particularly as he had known Nita in Paris also."

"Did you not wonder what had happened when he did not turn up for the wedding ceremony?"

"No. He was very irresponsible. We were married quite early in the morning. I decided that he had overslept or forgotten all about the matter."

"Then you did not know that Ramalho was in possession of the skull when you called upon him?" asked McKelvie presently, eying Parrish keenly.

"Duarte in possession of the skull!" ejaculated Parrish. "But that is preposterous. He couldn't have been."

"According to Professor Potter, Ramalho had just received the skull before your arrival and he had spoken to the effect that he was a doomed man. Why do you discredit my statement?"

"Because Garcia told me that the skull would never leave the hands of the avenger until every member of our race was destroyed," replied Parrish fearfully. "If I had known that Duarte had it, I should have taken it and crushed it under foot! I should have freed myself from the curse I am under that I might be at liberty to enjoy life again as in the days before I heard of the ivory skull!" He clenched his hands and shook them impotently above his head as though he would tear from them the imaginary shackles with which they were bound. Then suddenly he relaxed and shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "What is the use of railing

against fate. If Duarte had the skull he should have been in league with the avenger, yet his death proves him to have been a victim. Can it be that he is of my race, too?"

"Perhaps, Mr. Parrish, and I shall do my best to learn the truth concerning this strange affair. You say you wish to be free. There is only one way to accomplish that. Help me to put the avenger behind the bars," returned McKelvie.

A ray of hope lighted up the somber eyes of the man before us. "I will do all I can to help you."

"I want you to answer a few questions. How long were you with Ramalho?"

"About fifteen minutes. I wanted information concerning the necessary formalities to be gone through before I could get married."

"The countess was with you?"

"Yes. She was as anxious as I to set the date for the wedding as early as possible."

"You noticed nothing out of the way about the actions of Ramalho, nothing to indicate that he was under great mental stress?" pursued McKelvie.

"I do recall that I thought he looked rather white and tired but he took me into the dining-room for a glass of port and after that he seemed quite himself again. I thought it might have been the unusual warmth of the day. I attached no importance to the

matter. How could I possibly dream of such a contingency as occurred?"

"What was your mother's given name, Mr. Parrish? Or are you ignorant of that also?"

"Her name was the same as that of my wife. Nita."

"Do you recall your father?"

"Not at all. I understood he died when I was very young."

"Do you know anyone in Rio by the name of Niccolo?"

"Niccolo? No, I am sure I do not."

"He sent you a telegram yesterday afternoon. Didn't you receive it?"

"I had no message of any kind from anyone," answered Parrish, perplexed.

"Are you returning to Petropolis, Mr. Parrish?"

"I think that now that I am in Rio, I shall stay on until this mystery is cleared up."

"I was not asking out of curiosity but in order to know where I could find you in case of necessity," said McKelvie with a smile.

"At the Gloria." Parrish laid his hand on the knob of the door. "Nita will be getting anxious. If there is anything I can do for you, don't hesitate to let me know."

"I'll call upon you. Thank you, Mr. Parrish."

"You are entirely welcome. Good morning, gentlemen."

We waited until we heard the taxi drive away before we joined the *delegado* in the outer office; though, for my part, I should have liked to have spoken again to the countess before she left. But McKelvie was obdurate and so I had to forego the pleasure.

He had other things more important to think about, he said, than to stand around and chatter with a woman. At his request I informed the *delegado* that his next move was to get on the track of Fernandez, the dismissed gardener.

CHAPTER XVII

A PART OF THE TRUTH

"In your place I should have kept Parrish in jail and have telegraphed New York where to find him," I remarked as we walked away from the police station. "Disguise it as you will, the man is still a murderer."

"I have no personal interest in the countess, Professor," was the quick retort. "And as I told Parrish, I firmly believe that a man's deeds will find him out in the end and that as he measures to another, so shall it be meted out to him again."

"She only married him to retrieve her fortune," I said gloomily, my mind running in its original groove.

"My dear fellow, none are so blind as those who won't see. She married him for love. And you will infinitely oblige me if you never let her know the truth about her husband."

"So you don't want to spoil her romance, eh? You've grown tender-hearted overnight, or is it since meeting the lady?" I inquired, at which he only laughed and retorted, "The man is not guilty this time. Let her enjoy her fool's paradise while she may. And now let

us drop the lady from our conversation. I have a subject of much greater interest to discuss with you. Did you notice the resemblance?"

"What resemblance?" I asked, stupidly, trying to make connection between his rapid transition of ideas.

"The very marked resemblance of Parrish to this picture." He drew the photograph from his pocket. "The same contour of face, the same beauty and regularity of features and the same passionate temperament. And he said his mother's name was Nita."

I let my eyes rest again upon that lovely face and I knew that McKelvie had divined aright. Parrish was the man whose resemblance to the picture I had been unable to place. So she was his mother. But then of what possible value was the picture to Ramalho? I put the query to my companion.

"Apply your knowledge of logic to the problem," he returned. "This is a picture of Garcia's mother as well. He leaves it with the lawyer to be given to Ramalho, ergo she was probably Ramalho's mother, too."

"But the lawyer said that the latter's mother was a Parisian," I objected. I was floundering around in a sea of ideas, hopelessly lost and involved.

"That was merely a guess on his part. He said distinctly that he did not know positively," replied McKelvie.

"But in the event of your being correct, Ramalho

senior would then be the father of Parrish and Garcia as well. Why did he allow them to be sent to an orphanage? Why did he not bring them to Brazil with him?" I pointed out.

"I don't recall discussing that side of the question," he returned, drily. "I merely said that this was a picture of their mother."

We traversed another block in silence with my companion deep in his own thoughts. Presently he nodded his head as if satisfied that he was correct in his reasoning and continued the discussion where we had left off.

"Parrish said that his mother's sons were marked. Ramalho, too, bore the skull on his arm. I think I'm safe in claiming that the three men, Garcia, Parrish, and Ramalho were brothers."

"Not if Judith was correct in her assertion," I responded. "She told us that the mark on her husband's arm was made up of his initials."

"Judith was making that up as she did her other answers—out of whole cloth. See how everything fits in together like the pieces of a puzzle. Garcia, the oldest brother, is told the secret of the skull by his mother, we will say, with the injunction to warn his brothers when he knows that vengeance is to overtake him. He cannot be sure when this event will take place, but he receives an inkling of coming disaster. He prepares for any eventualities, by leaving with the lawyer a box

containing a letter revealing the story of the skull. Besides the letter he also incloses a photograph of the mother and such other evidence as is necessary to prove the authenticity of his statements. The box, however, is not to be delivered except under a certain circumstance, that circumstance being of course the approaching death of Garcia. He did not care to tell the lawyer who he was, for fear of drawing attention to himself, and I assume that he devised the wording of the cable so that the lawyer could be under no misapprehension. If it bore the word, death, the box was to be delivered to Ramalho. As Ramalho was not a fatalist he took the same precaution that Garcia did. He effaced the mark."

"What earthly good did they suppose that would do them?" I interrupted.

"Perhaps the avenger only knew his victims by the mark of the skull. By effacing it they hoped to put him off the track. That skull was pricked into the skin. It was no birthmark. It must have been done during infancy by a very clever person."

"Clever, when he waited thirty-odd years to avenge himself?" I was incredulous.

"We do not as yet know his motive, Professor. The desire for vengeance will often make a man wait many years until the moment comes when his victim will suffer most keenly. The thing that troubles me is not

the length of time that elapsed between the marking of the victims and the carrying out of his revenge. Why did he change his tactics? Why did he send Garcia a card, and then risk losing the skull by giving it to Ramalho? In the latter's place I should have done as Parrish suggested. I should have destroyed the thing."

"That would not necessarily avert death, would it?" I reminded him.

"It was not death they feared. It was eternal damnation of their souls," responded McKelvie seriously. "Why should X, as we called him before, avenge himself on Garcia and then risk losing that chance with Ramalho? And why has he ignored Parrish so completely?"

"To me the whole thing is very far-fetched. I wouldn't be surprised if Parrish was the avenger and his story a cock-and-a-bull yarn to put you off the scent. Didn't Niccolo telegraph something about drawing a red herring across the trail?"

McKelvie assented indifferently. "I do not think we have touched rock bottom yet by any means," he said. "The affair has ramifications, and a great many loose ends, too many to suit me. I am going to attempt to tie a few of them up. I am going to cable the Paris police for information concerning the lady of the picture, and while I am waiting for their reply I am going to learn all that I can concerning Ramalho's life in the

city. It may happen of course that his death had nothing to do with this other matter and that the murderer branded the body as a blind. I do not think so, but one must not overlook any details no matter how trivial."

"Here is a detail that you are overlooking," I said, after a moment's thought. "When Ramalho received the skull, he exclaimed, 'My wife's brother—gave it to me. I did not know that he—' And here is another. Bentley had the dagger in his possession at the time of the murder."

"Those are purely superficial, Professor. Bentley was lying. As for Ramalho's remark, like the Delphic oracle, it is capable of a double interpretation. Ramalho was under the impression that the skull came from St. John. We know that the assumption was false, since St. John received the package at the gate. Ramalho, however, would not know that and he may have been wondering how much he had told St. John on previous occasions about the mark on his arm. It may have been in his mind that St. John belonged to the race of the avenger and that he was taking this way to repay Ramalho for his neglect of Judith."

"It sounds plausible when you explain it," I returned.

"But you are still skeptical?" He smiled at some conceit of his own. "To get back to the original topic. I am going to have a talk with Dolores Castro. She

dances at the Palacio to-night. Men often unburden themselves to women of her type and she may be able to aid us considerably. Meet me at the entrance at eight and I'll engage to have a box." He paused and eyed me thoughtfully. "She won't be able to speak English, so that I shall have to depend on you, again, Professor."

"I'll do my best, Mr. McKelvie, though I am not as expert as you at gauging the truth of a statement by the intonation of the voice or the expression of the eyes," I returned.

"Practice makes perfect. Try your hand at reading Mrs. Clinton's mind again, will you? Don't be so timid as you were the last time. Intimate that you know what the tattoo on Ramalho's arm was and see whether her looks do not confirm your statement. Also find out what she knows of her brother's life outside the home."

Our walk had carried us within a few blocks of police headquarters. "I'm due yonder for a conference with Diago. Until eight to-night, then," he remarked. "Oh, by the way, Penna says the acid used in branding is a very old formula, a secret of the Medicis without a doubt. It attacks the human flesh but has no effect on ivory. X probably came across it in some ancient manuscript and put it to his own uses. Well, so long."

When I reached home it was luncheon time and after

our repast I asked Tom's wife to spare me a few moments. She graciously acceded to the request and took me into the studio where she said we would be free from interruption. I was pondering how best to broach the subject when she opened the discussion herself.

"Have you learned anything yet, Senhor?" she asked anxiously. "Was the picture of any help to you? Tom says that even your detective has made little progress so far. I think it is so foolish to try to avenge Duarte's death. Would it not be better to drop the matter at once?"

Though she spoke anxiously, she had recovered much of her former placid serenity.

"We may not have learned the entire truth, but we have had some success and it would be a pity to give up in sight of the goal. There is nothing for you to fear. Why did you think that harm would come to us if we meddled in this affair?"

She lowered her voice. "It was what Tom said about the skull that frightened me."

"And what did he say?"

When she remained silent, I added, "Dona Helena, in order to get at the truth Mr. McKelvie must know as much as possible concerning your brother. Why did he tell you that you must never mention the fact that he had a skull tattooed on his arm?"

Her eyes grew large with mingled terror and astonishment. "You know that, Senhor?" she whispered.

"That and a good deal more. For instance I know that he was only your half-brother, and that he feared the vengeance of the ivory skull." I was following McKelvie's directions implicitly.

She clasped her hands. "You are right, Senhor. I do not see how you can have learned all this, but it is the truth." She broke off as she heard a step in the hall, then went on. "As I said before, I had always believed the tattoo a birthmark. So did he until he got that box from the lawyer in July. Whatever the contents, they terrified him and he made Judith, Maria Theresa and myself swear that we would never reveal the fact that once he carried the mark of a skull on his arm. He said that if we ever breathed such a thing, death and disaster would overtake the whole family. So when I heard of the brand on his body, I feared for my loved ones. That is why I kept silent."

"You need have no further apprehensions," I reassured her. "The vengeance, if such it be, applies only to his mother's side of the family. You are not concerned in it at all. For myself I do not believe in such a thing. I think your brother was killed because someone was jealous of him."

"Thank you, Senhor. Is there any other way in which I can be of help to you?"

"Do you know anything of your brother's former mode of life outside the home?" I asked.

She looked at me in genuine surprise. "What should I know? A man does not tell the women of his household his affairs, Senhor."

"I suppose, then, that you would not know the name of your father's first wife?"

She shook her head. "I did not know that Duarte was only my half-brother until he told me himself in July. He gave me no details, nor mentioned who his mother was."

"Do you happen to know whether Neville St. John was in the house the night of the murder?" Having the opportunity before me, I decided to make the most of it and show McKelvie that I could be of service to the cause in more ways than one.

"Judith's brother? How should I know where he was that night, Senhor? You do not think that he——?"

"He won't tell us his whereabouts and he once threatened to kill your brother——"

I got no further. With a choking cry Maria Theresa ran into the room and flung herself on her knees beside her sister.

CHAPTER XVIII

MARIA THERESA'S CONFESSION

"Why, Maria Theresa, what is the matter with you?" inquired Tom's wife in alarm. "What has happened to make you weep?"

The girl raised a flushed and tear-stained face. "I heard what the Senhor said just now about Neveele. Oh, Helena, I'm a wicked, wicked girl and it is all my fault that Neveele won't say where he was," she exclaimed, beginning to sob afresh.

Dona Helena looked at her sister sharply. "What are you saying, child?"

"It was all Duarte's fault, really." The girl crossed herself at mention of that name. "He refused to let Neveele marry me and I said that I would do as I pleased, that I would marry without his consent. And then he became angry and told me that if I disobeyed him my marriage would be accursed and that I would never be happy."

"I was afraid, then," continued the girl, "but Neveele said that Duarte's words had no power to hurt us—

and so finally I told Neveele to arrange everything and I would do whatever he said."

"Maria Theresa!" exclaimed her sister, shocked.

"I don't care," returned the rebellious one, her lovely eyes sparkling with resentment at memory of her wrongs. "The afternoon of the fifteenth, Neveele talked to Judith in the garden and gave her a note for me. In the note Neveele said that he had all arrangements made and that he would be waiting for me at the back-gate at seven-forty-five; I was to meet him there with my suitcase.

"I packed my bag and hid it in my room and after dinner I was going to pretend to have a headache and so escape from the house. But Duarte remained home and as we left the dining-room he took me aside.

" 'You think to meet your lover to-night and go away with him, don't you?' he inquired. 'You might as well put the thought out of your mind for I have sent him word that you have decided to obey me. There will be no one waiting for you at the gate. Go upstairs to the drawing-room and help entertain Professor Potter.'

"I believed him and obeyed, but it would be just for that night, I decided. In the morning I would go to the Consulate and marry Neveele in spite of Duarte. And then Judith quarreled with her husband and I was sent to the school-room with Ricardo. We had to pass

the head of the back-stairs and there I saw Neveele coming up. I sent Ricardo on ahead of me and went down to meet Neveele. We could not talk there, so I took him into the garden around the back of the house so that we could not be seen by anyone leaving by the front gate."

The girl paused for breath; she had been talking in a steady stream, pouring out her confession as the waters rush forth when the barrier that held them pent up has been removed. I took the opportunity to ask a question.

"Can you recall what time this was?"

She shook her head. "I do not know what time it was, but as we stood at the bottom of the stairs I heard the door of the library close. I knew then that Duarte was still in the house and that is why I urged Neveele to talk to me in the garden. He upbraided me for not meeting him as I promised and I repeated what Duarte had said to me. It was all a lie, Helena. Duarte had sent no word and Neveele had been waiting at the gate for me all that time. He was afraid that something had happened to me. That is why he came to the house. Then he told me to get my bag and come with him but I—became frightened. All I could think of was the sound of Judith's sobs. Supposing I should be unhappy too and that you and Duarte never forgave me?" She looked up pleadingly at her sister. "He begged and

pleaded but I would not go. Then he told me I was a coward and that I did not really love him—and he went away, oh, so angry. I had hardly reached the schoolroom when Judith screamed and when I learned that Duarte was dead I was very glad I had not run away."

She added vehemently: "Neveele did not kill Duarte. He was in the garden with me. That is why he won't say where he was—because he loves me—and he's a gentleman. Oh, Helena, do you think he will forgive me and come back to me again? I've been so unhappy. He has not been to see me since that dreadful night."

Sometimes the right thing happens at the psychological moment, despite the opinion of critics to the contrary. She had hardly spoken the last word when we heard a step and St. John himself came into the room. At sight of him Maria Theresa jumped shamelessly to her feet and buried her tear-bedewed cheeks within the circle of his arm.

Dona Helena and I pretended to be very much interested in the view from the window. It was a fine view without doubt, a cobalt sky like the dome of some vast cathedral whose columns were the granite peaks rising in the distance and whose aisles were decorated with blossoms of all shapes and colors and filled with a congregation of houses in multicolored garments, but I cannot now recall what thoughts it induced. I was thinking rather with a certain complacency of Nita

Giovanni. She was the kind to follow the man she loved to the very bottomless pits of Hades if it were necessary. She would not have balked at a brother's threats or cared if all the world had proved to her that only unhappiness lay before her. Then I heaved a sigh and turned to listen to what St. John was saying.

"I came over because Mr. McKelvie called me up and told me that in my place he would not have given up so easily. I do not know how he guessed the truth since I told him nothing of myself——"

"It wouldn't be necessary," I amended drily. "I verily believe that he could read the innermost cogitations of the Sphinx herself."

"As things stand now," St. John smiled down upon the girl in his arms, "I feel as though I owe him an apology. I can speak freely of something which I dared not mention before for fear of dragging Maria Theresa's name into the discussion. When I left the garden that night, I saw a man disappearing through the iron door in the back fence. I overtook him in the alley and recognized Fernandez, the gardener. I thought nothing of the circumstance at the time because I assumed that he was probably going out to spend the evening at some tavern, but as I look back on the episode I recall that he looked at me furtively and pulled his hat over his face as though he did not want me to discover his identity."

"The police are looking for him," I returned. "He was dismissed by Ramalho during the afternoon of the murder."

"Then he was doing no good hanging around the place that night," replied St. John. "He was an ugly customer, surly, ill-tempered. I wouldn't be at all surprised if he had murdered Judith's husband."

"He couldn't have. What would he know of the ivory skull?" I demanded.

"The ivory skull?" St. John's tone was one of profound astonishment. I had forgotten that others were not so well acquainted with the details of the affair as I. I hinted that I had better enlighten him at some more propitious time when the ladies were not present to which he readily assented. Then seeing that he wished to consult Tom's wife, I returned to the library and my neglected task. Here he joined me a half hour later and I gave him the story of the activities of the skull as I myself knew it so far.

"If Mr. McKelvie thinks that Judith knows something about the skull, he is vastly mistaken. She had never heard of Ramalho until we came to Brazil and she met him at a dance. What should she know of his past life?" countered St. John.

"What made her marry him?" I inquired.

"I cannot conceive. I have been asking myself the

same question for over five months. The tortuous and complicated logic of the feminine mind is beyond me," he returned.

"She was not in love with him, then? Or perhaps, infatuated?" I demanded.

"Judith is excitable but she is also fairly level-headed where men are concerned. Besides there was James Bentley. She may have thought that by announcing her engagement to Ramalho, Bentley would come to terms. Unfortunately in this world things do not always work out as we would have them. Bentley remained away and there was nothing to do but carry out her promise to Ramalho. I may be entirely wrong, but that is the construction that I have always put upon the affair."

He rose and held out his hand. "Tell Mr. McKelvie that if I can serve him in any way, that I shall only be too glad to pay a small part of the debt I owe him."

He had no sooner gone than Cesario called me to the phone. For a moment I dallied with the pleasurable thought that I might be about to hear the voice of the countess. My hello was answered by the curt tones of Graydon McKelvie.

"Would you mind coming down to the precinct at once? We have the gardener but the Lord only knows what he is saying, or any of the rest of them for that

matter. Whatever it is, it is something vital. They are all very much excited, all except yours truly who not being able to understand what the fuss is about, is preserving an unbroken front."

I smiled at the picture that he drew. "Be with you in ten minutes," I replied briefly and hung up.

CHAPTER XIX

THE GARDENER

In less time than it takes to tell I had routed out Tom's chauffeur and had been driven at a swift pace to the precinct. When I entered I was met by McKelvie who was impatiently pacing the outer office while he awaited my advent. The police were nowhere to be seen.

"I've managed to make out this much," he greeted me. Opening his hand, he displayed Ramalho's studs, rings, and watch.

I stared at them in stupefied silence. "How on earth did the gardener get hold of those things," I asked. "I thought you deduced that the murderer had taken the jewelry as a blind."

"I beg your pardon for contradicting you. That theory was put forward by the *delegado,* not by me," he replied.

"I thought you indorsed it."

"I did not deny it, neither did I subscribe to it. I merely held my peace since I was not yet sure of my ground. I am still not sure, for up to the present

moment we have found no evidence either to prove or disprove the statement."

"Then, you believe that the gardener killed Ramalho?" I recalled St. John's opinion and hastened to relate what he had told me. My tone expressed the fervent wish that we had reached the end of the case. I might have known that our troubles could not be over so soon.

"St. John's information would have been more valuable if it had come somewhat earlier. However, we have the gardener, so that no time has been lost. These things were found on him when he was captured. He may have stolen them, or he may have acquired them in some other way; that is what I want you to find out. He did not kill Ramalho. He's powerful enough, but he's not left-handed."

"I thought Doctor Bentley had knocked that theory winding."

"I'm still undecided on that point. Come in and have a look at the fellow."

McKelvie led the way through the inner room and along a bare stone corridor toward a cell at the farther end, from which issued a series of strange and inexplicable sounds. For a moment I felt myself transported once more to the midst of the jungle where monkeys shrilled to one another across the tree-tops in answer to the jaguar's roar of hunger echoing through the

solemn stillness of the night. A few more steps brought me an explanation of this phenomenon. A double cell and in the first a number of police, gesticulating and chattering like excited apes at a figure in the farther inclosure, a figure, wild, disheveled, with blood-shot eyes, who howled and shook the bars in a frenzy of rage until I thought the iron must break in his huge, hairy paws. A shaft of sunlight slanting through the one window of the outer cell fell in level rays across a tray on which were spread coffee, rolls, and a plate of black beans.

At a sharp exclamation from McKelvie the police turned toward us and I proceeded to inquire what the trouble was and why they had not given the gardener his luncheon. The sub-*delegado,* a debonair young chap who was in charge in the absence of his superior, replied that the idea had come to him to make the gardener speak by using the method described as the punishment employed by the Olympian gods in the case of Tantalus.

"We had the devil's own time in arresting him," remarked the young official with a grimace. "He fought and bit like a wildcat."

"Give him his meal," I returned. "The Senhor McKelvie orders it."

While the young man hesitated between obedience and his own desires like a person who has arrived at

a cross-roads and is undecided which path to follow, McKelvie picked up the tray and carried it into the inner cell, placing it upon the cot. The prisoner, astonished by this maneuver, had ceased to shake the bars and was looking suspiciously from the police to McKelvie as if scenting some new and perhaps more diabolical trap; but when McKelvie had succeeded through pantomime in making him understand that he was free to appease his hunger, the poor fellow fell on his knees and caught McKelvie's hand in his, placing it to his coarse lips and murmuring broken snatches of blessings.

The Anglo-Saxon in contrast to the Latin has an instinctive and inbred horror of displaying emotion in public. McKelvie snatched away his hand and walked out of the cell with heightened color, the first time I had seen him lose his composure and that air of aloofness which left him untouched by passing events.

The gardener looked after him with the dumb eyes of a dog whose glance follows a loved master; then he fell upon the food like a ravenous wolf and for several minutes thereafter nothing was heard but the crunching of teeth and an occasional protest from the sub-*delegado,* who remarked cynically that now all hope of learning the truth was at an end. But McKelvie was of a different opinion. He lighted his pipe and told me to obtain the details of the capture.

"We put a detective on his trail this morning as soon as we knew that he was wanted," explained the young official. "According to testimony gathered from eye-witnesses, the gardener spent the night of the murder at a tavern near the Morro de Castello. In a moment of hilarity, he displayed his loot, saying he intended selling the diamonds in another town. One of the men present cast avaricious eyes upon the jewels and foolishly tried to rob the gardener when he thought the latter was in a drunken sleep. But the gardener, as you can see for yourself, is a powerful brute and even raw spirits could not deaden his senses entirely. Knives glittered and the other fellow was killed. You know what these tavern brawls are, Senhor," with an indifferent shrug. "The gardener was wounded in the leg and was forced to remain in hiding as much from the police as from the dead man's brother who, believing in the Mosaic law implicitly, declared a blood-feud. The gardener dared not come forth for fear of being killed and so had no way of procuring food, as this man had got on his trail and was hanging around waiting for his chance to avenge his brother. With this man our detective had a talk and so we were enabled to secure the gardener on rather short notice. As I say, we had to knock him senseless to arrest him, and while he was incapable of further damage we took the opportunity to search him. How he came by the diamonds

I do not know, as he has refused absolutely to say one word concerning them."

By this time the gardener had consumed the food upon the tray, and was sitting expectantly watchful for the next move on our part. It was my turn to step into the breach, and I did so by asking the gardener for an account of his movements from the moment when Ramalho dismissed him to that in which he arrived at the tavern.

At first I could not understand the mumbled answer, for the man spoke a language all his own and I was not familiar with the patois of the street. Gradually I managed to make out, with the assistance of one of the police, that the gardener refused to tell his story to anyone but McKelvie. This put us in a quandary out of which McKelvie himself extricated us. He ordered the police to leave the cell and wait outside, and then he showed the gardener that I was his friend by patting me heartily on the back, a suggestion which the man was quick to understand, especially as I followed it up with the gift of a few milreis.

I shall not attempt to reproduce the story that he told us in his own words, for such a task would be well-nigh impossible and would result in a version so confused that only a person familiar with the Portuguese language could make head or tail of the ensuing narrative.

When Ramalho had dismissed the gardener, the latter, considering the act unjust, determined to revenge himself on his erstwhile employer. He did not harbor the thought of murder but rather that of robbery, since the latter crime would prove not only less dangerous but also more lucrative. As the butler had told us, the gardener had packed his belongings and left the place, but at night he had returned to carry out his plan. He knew that the library was left open and that he could easily gain access to the house through that room. The family would be in the drawing-room as was their custom and he would have the house practically to himself.

When he reached the library he found it in darkness. He stepped in through the window and was cautiously making his way toward the door when he stumbled over an object in his path, an object which felt soft and warm to his touch as he endeavored to regain his feet. Frightened, he struck a match and in its momentary flare he saw that he had fallen over the body of a man, the lifeless body of Duarte Ramalho. With a stifled cry of horror the gardener groped his way back to the window and was about to flee the place when before his mind's eye he saw again the sparkle of the diamonds in Ramalho's shirt-front. He had come to rob the living, why should he hesitate to rob the dead. One was a crime, the other a mortal sin.

On the threshold of the window he stood, superstition urging him to give wings to his feet and leave that accursed spot; avarice whispering what a find was here with no one to know that it was he who had taken the diamonds. In the end greed won out. The gardener returned to the body, which was lying on its back, but in order to secure the booty he must have light. Seeing that the door was closed, he ventured to turn on the lamp upon the table and by its rays he carried out his gruesome task. Then, cupidity being satisfied, fear took possession of his soul. Suppose the body were found immediately and he were accused. They would send him up for life, for a deed for which he was not responsible. It was at this precise moment that his eye fell upon the urn which stood uncovered in its place behind the door. He did not stop to reason out the idea that came to him as a cleverer man might have done, weighing the pros and cons. He simply saw a means of preventing discovery until he himself was safe in another town beyond the reach of the police, and he picked up the body and carrying it to the urn, dropped it in, and clapped the lid on.

Pleased with his success, like a child that has accomplished some difficult task and must perforce boast of his prowess, the gardener extinguished the light, and leaving the garden by the alley, took himself to the tavern to drink to his own performance and to display

to the others his ingenuity in turning someone else's crime to his own account. In the alley he had received a severe fright, for he had been followed by Neville St. John. As the latter did not accost him, however, the gardener came to the conclusion that he had not been recognized and so he dismissed the young American from his mind.

That in substance was the story which I obtained and which I retailed to McKelvie in the outer office after we had turned the gardener over to the police again that justice might take its course, since the man had broken the law and so deserved whatever punishment was his due. When McKelvie had heard the entire account, he broke out into self-contemptuous abuse.

"What a dullard I have been!" he exclaimed. "That's what comes of thinking that I know it all. I might have known that there had been two persons in that room that night."

"I don't see how you could have," I returned. "The gardener left no trace of his presence. Don't chide yourself for something that you could not have foreseen."

"That is just it. I should have foreseen it. When you remarked that X should be easy to find since he had left so many clues to his personality, I answered that the fact was troubling me, that there were too

many clues. I should have followed up that lead. I should have distrusted the ease with which I discovered traces of X's presence. What did I do instead? I went around looking for a left-handed, Russian-cigarette smoking, powerful man," he replied in disgust. "I might have known that the avenger would have no object in hiding the body or taking the diamonds."

"I think you are unjust to yourself. Did you not order the arrest of the gardener? You must have suspected him of connection with the case."

"That was a chance shot. I thought the avenger might have had an accomplice, that perhaps the gardener had had himself dismissed on purpose. It is good of you to try to defend me, but I can't hide behind pure fool's luck."

He paced up and down a while with frowning brows, then he swung abruptly toward me.

"We'll have to work fast now. I'm going to learn the truth from Bentley about that dagger. Will you be kind enough to go home and tell Judith that I am going to bring Bentley over for a joint conference?"

His words opened up a vista of intolerable thoughts. If the gardener hid the body, anyone at all might have killed Ramalho. Did McKelvie begin to suspect Judith after all, now that his previous chain of reasoning had snapped asunder? He claimed that she had been look-

ing for the skull, and fright at finding the body, which she had left on the floor, stuffed into the urn might have caused her cry.

"Surely," I questioned, "you can't have changed your mind about Judith's innocence?"

He lifted his eyes to meet mine, but his glance was noncommittal. "I am making no more rash deductions. When we have heard the truth from Judith and Bentley, I will tell you what I think. In the meantime you can drive me to Gomez's house and go ahead yourself to prepare the girl."

CHAPTER XX

A NEW VERSION

After leaving McKelvie at Gomez's house, I returned homeward unwillingly, for I was not overkeen concerning the coming interview. I could not see what McKelvie expected to gain by hurling Doctor Bentley at Judith's head, metaphorically speaking. She was still in mourning for her husband; it would have been more tactful to have permitted time and their own hearts to bring these two young people together again. Strange that a man of McKelvie's fine sensibilities should have been so lacking in judgment in an affair of this sort. But I suppose the cynical attitude which he adopted toward all matters pertaining to love was partly to blame; that and the fact that he was actuated by the desire to clear up the mystery as soon as possible.

To my surprise Judith made no objection to meeting Doctor Bentley, rather did she seem glad that the opportunity was to be hers, and as we sat in the library awaiting the doctor's arrival I looked at her again with

the eyes of a man whose interest in womankind had increased with the passing hours. She was wearing black in deference to custom, and her face was thin, but otherwise she seemed to have recovered from her loss with amazing rapidity; or perhaps it was the thought of Bentley that brought that wild-rose pink to dye her cheeks, that gave an added sparkle to her eyes, an upward quirk to the corners of her mouth.

When we heard the sound of steps upon the walk outside, Judith had her first misgivings, and she rose in confusion, exclaiming, "No, no, I cannot see him, indeed I can't."

"You will not have to, Madame," responded McKelvie, walking coolly through the open window. "Doctor Bentley is otherwise engaged at present. Under the circumstances I thought you might be just as well pleased to relate your story before you meet him. I should prefer it so, at any rate."

"You meant every word of what you told me over the phone, Mr. McKelvie?" she asked, with anxiety apparent in the glance she gave him.

"Every word of it. Doctor Bentley is under the mistaken impression that by keeping silent he is shielding you. Therefore he cannot be guilty of your husband's murder," replied McKelvie, thereby supplying me with the clue to Judith's complacency. "I beg your pardon for double-crossing you, Professor," he added,

"but after you had driven away I remembered that I had forgotten to give you the message for the Senhora, the open sesame to the secret she has been guarding these many days."

Judith returned to her chair. "I don't understand why Jimmy should think me guilty," she said, puzzled and hurt too, to judge by her tone.

McKelvie smiled quizzically. "My dear young lady, those who live in glass houses should never throw stones. Were you not suspecting him?"

"But he had the dagger, Mr. McKelvie," she retorted with spirit, "so how could he possibly imagine that I could have wielded it?"

"We will clear up that point when we talk to the doctor. In the meanwhile I should like the truth concerning the events of that day and night in which you directly participated," answered McKelvie, perching himself on the edge of the table.

"I shall have to begin further back than that, but I will try to make it brief," remarked Judith in her soft, drawling voice. "James Bentley and I grew up in the same town, fell in love with each other, and became engaged just before he left for New York to enter Columbia. He had taken his medical degree in the South, but he wanted to become a surgeon, and while he was in New York he made a good many friends and lived the usual gay life of a young man of means

in a big city. I thought nothing of the matter until a girl friend went to New York for the winter. When she returned she told me of things which she claimed to have seen and heard about but which I know now were false, things which caused me to break with Doctor Bentley. Then we came to Brazil, and because my heart was dead within me and it seemed to me that nothing really mattered I accepted Duarte Ramalho's attentions and married him."

How erroneous her brother's conclusions had been and how easy it is to build soaring structures upon false foundations, which should teach us, though few of us profit by the precept, that one should not judge another without first putting oneself in that other's place.

"I thought my marriage would help me to forget Jimmy," Judith went on, more bitterly. "I was a fool. I hated Duarte from the moment he became my husband, and every act of his only served to show me how much happier I should have been had I married Jimmy even though I believed ill of him."

She added presently: "I had been married three months when the same girl friend wrote to say that she had lied to me about Jimmy. She had thought herself in love with him and had taken that means of getting me to break the engagement, hoping that Jimmy would turn to her. For months she had sought to win him and then, the irony of it, she met another man

with whom she fell in love on sight and whom she married. She was writing to make amends. Make amends," Judith repeated, with falling accent. "She had ruined my life, for only Duarte's death could sever the tie that bound us.

"Then Jimmy hurt his hand, and because I was here and the girl in her contrition had confessed to him the truth, he came to Brazil and sought me out. But I refused to see him. I was breaking my heart as it was," she explained pathetically for her seeming hardness.

"But Jimmy was obstinate and he secured a position with Gomez. He made no attempt to see me, but he let me know that he was close by. The day of the murder he broke his self-imposed rule. He had seen Duarte in Dolores Castro's company several times and the night before the murder he had heard enough talk at the Club to guess at the truth. The next afternoon he came to me in the arbor where I was reading. I had just gotten rid of Neville, who had intrusted me with a note and some directions for Maria Theresa. Jimmy's unexpected appearance startled me and I dropped my book. The dagger which I use as a marker slid out of the pages, but he did not notice it in recovering the book for me."

"And it remained in the arbor?" queried McKelvie.

"No, I only wish it had," she answered fervently.

"We talked. He threatened my husband and begged me to secure a divorce. I tried to show him how impossible such a course would be, and when he refused to listen to reason I got up and left him. When I reached the bend in the path I looked back at him. He was standing near the entrance to the arbor holding in his hand my dagger and looking at it in a strange and sinister way. My first impulse was to hurry back and take the knife from him; my second was to tell myself indignantly that James Bentley was incapable of murder. I went on to the house and upstairs to my room."

When she had ended her narrative she glanced up at McKelvie. "Do you understand now why I thought he had killed my husband?" she asked. "He had the dagger and he had threatened Duarte. Since his accident, Jimmy has been forced to use his left hand and he's strong enough to have put the body in the urn. Do you wonder I was frantic the day you questioned me in the garden?"

"And he smoked Russian cigarettes," added McKelvie with a glance at me. "A very promising suspect he made, all the evidence pointed toward him with the exception of the skull. I could not make that jibe somehow. What made you connect him with the ivory skull, Madame?"

She looked at him in undisguised admiration. "I

don't see how you have learned all these details so accurately. How do you know anything of this skull?"

"That is too long a story to go into now. I do know that you were looking for it in the urn that night. Will you not give us the rest of the tale?"

She smiled tremulously. "I'm almost afraid not to, for fear that you will learn it in spite of me. When dinner was over that night, Duarte asked me to go with him to our room as he had something of importance to tell me. Wondering what was coming, I obeyed him. Then he told me a strange, wild tale, saying that through his mother he had inherited the vengeance of the skull, that it was on his track and that his only safety lay in flight. I did not believe him. I thought he was trumping up a story to throw me over entirely for Dolores. Then he swore that he was not lying to me, and that if I wanted proof I would find it in the bottom of the urn where he had flung the accursed skull. I thought him mad. I let him go. Gradually, however, I recalled that he had had a faint, distended tattoo of a skull on his arm which he had afterwards destroyed. I decided for my own peace of mind to put to the test the truth of his tale. I slipped down to the library, lifted the lid of the urn and found—" She shuddered at the memory as her voice died away into a whisper. "When I saw Duarte, I lost my sense of balance. I cried out in terror and fled. Later I heard

talk about the skull and how it had vanished from the urn. I believed because of the dagger that Jimmy was to blame and I was afraid he had taken the skull, that in some inexplicable way he was connected with the vengeance that Duarte feared. That is why I lied to you," she ended, appealingly. "I wanted to save him and I knew no other way."

"The way of a woman in love, but not a clever way for all that. It made me suspect Bentley where before I had not taken him into account. It also gave the police a new outlook on the problem confronting them."

"The police?" she repeated in terror.

McKelvie spoke reassuringly. "There is nothing to be alarmed about. I'll come to that point later. What happened during the interview between yourself and Bentley just before I talked to you in the garden? You did not accuse him, surely?"

"He sent me a note begging me to see him. I found him in the arbor, where he had been waiting and smoking furiously. When I arrived he said that he came to tell me that he would always be waiting for me no matter what I had done. I did not understand him. Then he kissed my hand and hurried away."

McKelvie waxed sarcastic. "Just the sort of idiotic fool thing a man like Bentley would do, just the sort of thing he has done in fact." He turned to me. "Here's a pretty kettle of fish. Ten minutes before I

reached Doctor Gomez's place, the *delegado,* who has been working on his own ideas, put Doctor Bentley under arrest, and Bentley handed himself over with the brilliant comment that he alone was guilty." McKelvie was thoroughly disgusted. "I suppose he'd be pleased to see himself condemned."

Judith cried out at that with blanched face. "And you have let me sit here and waste time telling you my story when Jimmy is locked in a cell and may be sentenced at any moment," she accused him indignantly. "Have you no heart?"

"Gently, Madame. I could hardly secure his release until I had sufficient evidence to prove to him that in remaining silent he was acting like a fool. Now I can assure him that his fears for your safety are groundless. That may induce him to tell us the truth in his turn."

She clasped her hands and stood before him like a suppliant. "Forgive me. I—do you suppose—would he think me overbold if I went with you?" she asked timidly.

"On the contrary. I think he deserves some compensation at your hands," he retorted somewhat sternly. "If you will get your bonnet——"

A bright spot of color appeared in either cheek and her eyes blazed, but she made no answer except to leave the room with a haughty step and head flung back.

I raised my eyes questioningly to his and he laughed lightly. "Like most of her sex, she does not like to hear the unvarnished truth about herself," he said satirically.

"She has suffered, too," I pointed out.

"She deserved to suffer. To judge a man and condemn him without a hearing merely upon circumstantial evidence—even the most hardened criminal is not sentenced without a fair trial," he retorted.

"Her pride was hurt."

"Pride!" He laughed jarringly. "Her pride was hurt and so she broke with him. And his pride forbade his stooping to explain. *Quelle comedie!*" He threw up his hands in disgust. "Man is a queer animal, Professor. I sometimes wonder why the Lord bothered to make him at all."

Judith's advent put an end to this philosophical discussion and we drove for the third time to the precinct. The *delegado* sensed at once why we had come and ordered Doctor Bentley brought into the room. He came with his mournful countenance radiant and his restless eyes bright with the light of self-sacrifice. When he beheld Judith, he halted in his stride and waved her sharply away.

"Judith!" he cried. "You do not belong here." He swung toward the *delegado* with outstretched hands. "Let her go. It is all a mistake. I alone am to blame."

Before the *delegado* could reply, Judith had flung herself on her knees before the doctor.

"Jimmy," she said, brokenly, "Jimmy, I am not in any danger. I have come to release you. You could do this for me—after the way I treated you."

Gently he raised her. "I would die for you, Judith," he answered, simply.

It was McKelvie, the scoffer, who suggested that we step outside and view the scenery, although there was nothing of interest to see along the narrow street except a vender of fowls who led his patient donkey by the bridle while he called his wares in a raucous voice which soared unmusically above the squawking of the hens imprisoned in the narrow paniers which had been slung across the mule's back. Ten minutes we allowed the lovers, then we reëntered the *delegado's* office. They had made their peace with one another and were sitting together on a wooden bench, not in the least self-conscious, since Judith allowed her bright head to remain pillowed against his shoulder as we drew up chairs to hear the doctor's side of the affair.

"It must appear strange to you that, loving Judith as I do, I should still be willing to believe her guilty of such a crime. This is the excuse I offer in extenuation. To my mind the deed was not a criminal act but one of retribution. I had had the impulse when I stood with the dagger in my hand to do what I assumed

Judith had been compelled to do to avenge her honor."

"But, Jimmy, you had the dagger," broke in Judith, in perplexity.

"No, I put it on the table."

"Doctor Bentley," interrupted McKelvie, "I should like to make a suggestion. We will make more progress and have a clearer notion of the part you played if you will start at the beginning, that is with your actions on the day of the murder itself."

The doctor nodded. "When Judith refused to see me I naturally came to the conclusion that she was happily married and would rather not be reminded of other days. It was not a charitable thought, but I had only her actions to guide me in forming my decision. When I heard from various sources of the neglect to which she was subjected, my indignation got the better of my discretion and I called on Judith."

"We are somewhat pressed for time, and as Madame has told us what occurred in the arbor, I would be obliged if you would recommence your story at the point where she left you alone," interposed McKelvie.

"As you wish, sir," assented Bentley, readily. "As I walked across the arbor to leave the place, I trod upon an object which I picked up. It was Judith's dagger. At first I was going to call to her and return it; then the thought obtruded itself that chance had placed the weapon in my hands to free her from her bondage. Such

an action would necessarily mean the loss of her regard, but as I believed myself to have already lost her love, it mattered little to me what I did or what I became as long as I might serve her. I had reached the front gate when another idea reared its head to confront me. Supposing Judith loved her husband, blackguard though he was, and that my deed should leave her free but desolate. He might be unfaithful, but while she cared for him he was safe from me. I retraced my steps to the house. The library window was open and the room empty. I stepped in and laid the dagger on the table."

I looked across significantly at McKelvie. I had been right in asserting that the dagger was on the table late that afternoon. I saw a look of incredulity leap into those sharp eyes, veiled instantly as he noted that I was watching him. Then he turned again to listen to Bentley.

"That night Doctor Gomez was called to the house. He returned to tell me that Duarte Ramalho had been murdered. I could not sleep. I walked the streets in an agony of suspense, waiting for morning and the details. I heard that the weapon used was Judith's dagger and that the blow was struck by a left-handed person. I saw Penna, but he told me nothing of the urn and the skull. Perhaps he had been ordered not to talk since Judith says that Mr. Clinton used his

influence to have the details suppressed. When you called on me last night and told me that all the evidence pointed to Judith, I thought the police were on her trail and so I sent them word that I was the man they wanted."

He spoke unaffectedly of his intention to shield Judith at all costs, but he did not impress McKelvie particularly, for that young man was of a purely logical turn of mind and could find no excuse for quixotic actions, however well meant.

"You would have served her better, in my opinion, Doctor, if you had gone to her frankly and told her what you intended to do. You would then have arrived at the truth of the affair and saved yourselves days of unhappiness."

I thought Bentley was going to take offense, but McKelvie's smile was disarming, and so the doctor contented himself with prophecy. "Some day you are going to fall in love, and when that happens, sir, you will do many things that in a saner moment you could not believe yourself capable of."

"Without doubt," McKelvie agreed promptly, "and so I shall have a care and avoid the disease. Then you were not in earnest when you claimed that the blow might have been struck by a right-handed person?"

"I did not see the body myself, but from Penna's description the blow was too powerful a one to have

been struck from the side, as you yourself suggested last night. I was merely trying to evolve an alibi that would hold water in case of trouble, but when you seemed unconvinced I came to the conclusion that my ruse had failed," responded the doctor.

McKelvie turned to me. "Will you ride home with me on the cars, Professor, and let the doctor have the machine? There are some points I want to discuss with you."

I was delighted to comply, for I realized that Bentley desired to be alone with the girl, and so we left them there to return home at their own convenience.

"Have you heard from Paris?" I inquired as we boarded a street car.

"I couldn't possibly get an answer before to-morrow morning," he returned. "Did you go into the library after dinner by any chance?"

"No. I went right upstairs."

"I should very much like to have known whether the dagger was still on the table. It would simplify matters considerably."

"Now that we have eliminated everybody from the case, we have nothing left to go on, not even a clue of any sort," I remarked presently.

"We can still hunt for X, with his penchant for Russian cigarettes and his habit of using his left hand instead of his right," replied McKelvie quietly.

"Two hours ago you told me you were entirely in the wrong in assuming that those qualities belonged to X," I protested.

"Because the second story is weak and caves in, is no reason for pulling up the foundations of a building," he returned caustically. "I was wrong in supposing that X had to be strong enough to carry the body. I still maintain that the cigarette we found near the house was left there by him."

"And the one in the arbor?"

"That was Doctor Bentley's, one of those coincidences that often occur in life. Don't forget that you have an appointment with me to-night. Eight-thirty will be time enough to meet me."

CHAPTER XXI

AT THE PALACIO

At eight-thirty, according to agreement, I presented myself at the door of the Palacio to find McKelvie awaiting me. Outside the theater a steady stream of private cars and taxis bore witness to the popularity of the Senhorita Dolores Castro. Already the place was crowded and we found no little difficulty in making our way through the marble lobby and up the flight of marble steps, with their black onyx balustrades, to a box on the right of the house. The orchestra was engaged in tuning up, and to the accompaniment of the shrill squeaks of violins answered by a rumble from the bass drum or a hoarse croak from a trombone, the preliminary clearing, as it were, of instrumental throats, McKelvie scanned the theater through his opera glasses. Then he called my attention to the opposite box.

I took up the glasses and trained them on the occupants of the box in question. In a low-cut dress of silver cloth, which set off to advantage the beautiful arms and shoulders and enhanced the blackness of her hair, the Contessa di Sforza was animatedly engaged

in entertaining a gentleman who sat behind her and whose features I could not distinguish. Beside his wife, but not in the least diverted by her talk, was Parrish, looking as gloomy as though the rising curtain were about to depict the tragedy of the universe instead of the graceful art of one of the best dancers in Brazil.

"Who is the man behind her?" I questioned.

McKelvie retrieved the glasses. "There is something familiar about him," responded my companion with a pleased smile on his lips which set me to wondering if it were not the countess he was looking at so steadfastly. "If she would only move a little. Ah, that is better. I can see his face quite clearly now."

"Who is it?" I demanded impatiently.

McKelvie laid down the glasses with a speculative look in his eyes. "So, that is odd," he murmured to himself. "Can it be that my first idea was the correct one after all?"

My demand to know his meaning was swept aside in the stir created by the rising of the curtain on a stage of purple and gold hangings fantastically decorated with scrolls and figures whose import it was impossible to learn. In the very center of the stage stood a figure draped in black poised immovably against that background like a statue carved from ebony. Then as the music began its weird and solemn chant, the figure rose to its full height and unfolding its arms revealed

Dolores Castro decked out in gorgeous raiment, a shimmering gown of rose and gold to represent a frivolous, gay, and pleasure-loving butterfly. Slowly she began her rhythmic dance while the music pulsed and throbbed with the joy of life, growing ever stronger and more ecstatic as the dancer whipped herself into a very frenzy of delight, whirling like a dervish with streaming hair and laughing eyes, with more and more abandon until it seemed she must have reached the pinnacle of all earthly desires. And now softly, sadly the notes of the violins wailed throughout the darkened hall, foreshadowing the doom of all mortal pleasures until broken and beaten on the wheel of life the dancer faltered in her steps and with one final whirl dropped upon the boards to rise no more.

Lights were turned on and the audience, composed mostly of men, fairly went wild, clapping and cheering enthusiastically. To me the whole thing was horrible, the mad delirium of a composer's brain, and I was glad when McKelvie suggested that we slip around to the wings and interview the dancer before her next appearance on the stage. We need not have hurried, since she was holding court for her admirers, and it was not until twenty minutes later that Diago's card proved of sufficient potency to admit us to her dressing-room, from which she had succeeded in banishing even the most ardent of her adorers.

She was seated before a mirror in a garish kimono of red and black, with her raven hair still hanging loose about her face. Her eyes were black, smoldering, and her mouth, overrouged, a cruel scarlet gash against a skin whose color might be described as a pale brown. Seen thus close at hand under the merciless light of the one lamp, her beauty was but a tawdry mask, a daring and cheap imitation of the refined loveliness of the beautiful countess.

I had no use for the dancer, but as the responsibility for securing information devolved upon me, I opened the dialogue by paying her those compliments which are the very breath of life to the members of her profession. She rewarded me with a feline smile that revealed a flash of white teeth, then she bent to the mirror and began skillfully to shade the corners of her eyes. She might have been alone on a desert island for all the embarrassment that our presence caused her. I was doubtless blushing for the three of us, since McKelvie, too, seemed quite at his ease as he watched Dolores Castro with the same intentness that a cat will watch a mouse.

"The Senhor did not come here solely to pay me compliments," remarked the dancer after a slight pause. "What is it that you—or rather Diago—wishes to know?"

I laid aside pretense and got down to business, thankful for the common-sense view she had adopted.

"You were acquainted with Duarte Ramalho, were you not?" I asked, somewhat timidly.

She laughed, but it was not a pleasant laugh to hear. "Acquainted! I think I was just a bit more than acquainted with him." She turned a pair of blazing eyes upon me, her mouth distorted as she exclaimed, passionately, "He was mine, all mine, until that creature stole him from me!"

"I beg your pardon." McKelvie's cool voice was like a bank of snow applied to a smoldering pile. "Ask her if she speaks any other language besides Portuguese, Professor. I think I had better handle the conversation myself."

I was only too happy to abdicate. I put his question to the woman before us. With a flashing smile she assured him that she could "speak Englis a leetle bit" and French quite well. "I dance in Paris much time," she added in English. McKelvie elected to use French, wisely deciding that pigeon English might be as difficult to understand as her own native tongue.

"My interest in Ramalho, Madame, lies only in one direction," he began. "Men often confide in the women with whom they are in love. Did he ever tell you anything of his family, what race he sprang from on his mother's side?"

Dolores Castro laid down her hand-glass and faced McKelvie. "Why do you wish to know, Monsieur?" she asked quickly, suspicion leaping into her eyes.

"In order to clear up the mystery of his death," responded McKelvie gravely. "I believe that the skull is at the bottom of the affair."

"He swore me to secrecy, but why should I care for a promise made to one who never kept his word?" she asked bitterly. "He swore to be true to me, and one smile from her lips and he was false to his oath." She beat her breast with her clenched hands. "I, Dolores Castro, scorned, cast aside like an old shoe, for that woman! If I had had a knife in my hand I should have killed her—and him, too. *Mon Dieu,* that I should have sat by tamely and let him get away!" She turned her hate-filled countenance toward the mirror and at sight of her reflection she hid her face in her hands and rocked back and forth to the accompaniment of a cascade of wild laughter.

We remained in mute silence until with an effort she recovered her self-possession. "I should not rave," she said passively. "I will spoil my looks. I will tell you anything that you wish to know."

"I should like you to tell me as connectedly as possible just what he told you concerning the ivory skull and his fears in regard to it," suggested McKelvie.

"It was the third of July that he met me at the

theater and took me to my hotel directly the show was over because, he said, he had something of importance to tell me, something that might affect me as well. Before he would utter a word he swore me to secrecy. I was on pins and needles. *Mon Dieu,* I thought he was going to say that he was tired of me!"

She laughed mirthlessly and resumed her story in a toneless voice. "It's a strange story that he told me, Monsieur. I do not vouch for the truth of it. I did not believe him when he related it to me, but he was in such mortal terror that I listened to set his mind at ease. First he showed me a photograph which he swore to me was his mother's picture. She was young and very beautiful. Then he gave me a letter to read. When he was engaged in pouring himself a cordial, I stole that letter."

She gave us a defiant glance as she added: "I wanted something to hold over him in case he was lying to me. I did not trust him and I was jealous of that pictured face." She turned back to her dressing-table and unlocking her jewel-case, extracted from the bottom a sheet of note-paper which she handed to McKelvie.

"That will tell you better than I can the story he regaled me with," she said, resuming her interrupted toilette.

McKelvie and I bent over the letter. It was written in French in a flowing hand and contained the following

confirmation of my companion's deductions concerning the relationship between Garcia and Ramalho:

"Duarte:

"Thirty-eight years ago Nita Carini, an Italian girl of high birth, married a Brazilian, Manoel Ramalho. It is enough for my purpose if I say that of that marriage I was the eldest and you the youngest son. I am inclosing a photograph of our mother and sufficient evidence in the shape of a copy of the marriage certificate and of your and my birth records to prove to you the truth of my asseverations."

McKelvie interrupted the reading to ask whether the dancer had seen these last, but she declared she knew nothing of them.

"A happy union that marriage would have been but for one thing. My mother came of a race accursed, came of a people who live in dread of the power of the ivory skull. What this skull is or why they should fear it, I do not know. Sufficient that such is the case. My mother feared its vengeance, and when she found that her sons were born marked she feared for their souls as well. Mother love proved stronger than her love for her husband, and so she schemed until she had devised a means for cheating vengeance. She was

afraid to destroy the marks on our arms, so she evolved the scheme which she carried out. She turned you over to our father that he might not be deprived of both wife and children and then she disappeared with me. Shortly after, she died and I was sent to an orphanage, from which I ran away and went to sea. Years later when I had made my fortune I went back to the orphanage and the sister gave me a packet which she said had been found upon my person when I was first brought to the institution. It was sealed and addressed to me in my mother's hand with the injunction that it was not to be opened until I was twenty-one. From it I gleaned the narrative which I have set down here for your benefit.

"Your father married again after my mother's death, but as he had not changed his name it was easy enough to trace you. However, there is no need to revive old memories nor indeed to make your life a hell on earth as mine has been since learning the truth. When I can prove that the skull is actively at work will be time enough to warn you, and so I am making arrangements to that effect with your lawyer.

"When you receive this letter, you may rest assured that I shall be dead and that vengeance shall have begun its fell work. Destroy the mark upon your arm, since that is the sign by which the avenger shall know you, change your name and hide your identity from

the world. Only so can you hope to escape the ivory skull. When the first warning of your impending fate reaches you it will be too late. You may fly to the uttermost parts of the earth, but he will find you out. Death alone can cheat him, for it is the soul he would damn for all eternity.

"Therefore take heed and follow this advice.

"BENJAMIN GARCIA RAMALHO."

McKelvie's eyes were shining as he folded up the letter. "I may keep this for a while?" he inquired.

"Forever if you want it. It is no good to me now," returned Dolores Castro indifferently.

"What advice did you give him? That I presume was his idea in confiding in you?"

"*Ma foi,* what advice do you suppose I gave him! I did not believe him. Why should I advise him to run away?" she queried with a shrug. "I told him he was a fool to give up a pleasurable existence for an uncertainty which might not even be true. Who was this Garcia? He might turn out to be a blackmailer."

"And what did Ramalho say to that?" questioned McKelvie.

"He showed me the mark on his arm. I said that if that was what had made a coward of him, I could easily efface it for him. After that he would be perfectly safe," she returned. "He was fond of luxury. To hide

himself away did not appeal. He followed my advice and remained at home. It would have been better if he had gone," she ended somberly.

"Where were you the night of the murder?" continued McKelvie, presently.

She lit a cigarette before she answered. "I was here dancing. I did not kill him. It is my one regret that I did not kill them both when I had the chance!" Though the words were passionate, the tone was that of a person conducting a pleasant conversation. She was recalling that her looks were paramount but her eyes betrayed her by their smoldering gaze.

"From your conversation I am to imply that Ramalho threw you over for someone else? Did you ever see the woman in question?"

Her words were bitter. "That is where the trouble started. He was playing a double-game, sending me flowers and notes, and spending the evenings with her. But I caught them at it. The first time, he brought her to see me dance—the audacity of it! He sat back in the shadows—thought I wouldn't recognize him—came to my room between acts. But I wasn't fooled. I saw him bending over her hand and murmuring love sonnets. The next evening they were at the restaurant together. When I came in she looked at me with scorn and spoke to him. He raised his eyes from his glass and when he saw who it was he went white. I nodded

to him to join me and he would have done so, but she addressed him again and he deliberately turned his back on me. It was then that I should have avenged myself—" She conquered her rising passion and added, "I never saw him again. But what does she care that he is dead and that my heart is broken? She has another puppet on her string now—and she can still laugh. . . . She is here to-night. You may have seen her, Monsieur."

"What is her name?" asked McKelvie slowly and my heart stood still while I awaited her answer.

"She is a lady, *une grande dame*. Her name is Nita Giovanni, Contessa di Sforza, but she is no better than a demi-mondaine for all her fine airs," replied the dancer, harshly.

"You are mistaken." The words came from my lips without conscious volition. She, the countess, to vie with Dolores Castro for the favor of a man like Duarte Ramalho! It was incredible; nay, more, it was impossible. "You have dreamed this tale of yours," I said hotly.

She smiled bitterly. "Has she stolen your wits, too, Senhor?" she remarked in her own tongue. "I have made no mistake. If you do not believe me she will tell you herself that I have spoken the truth. She will be delighted to display her prowess and to show you how easily she can make a man forget his former love."

She sprang erect with clenched hands and impassioned eyes. "She thinks she is clever, but I, too, can play at that game. She shall pay—and sue me, Dolores Castro, whom she despises—sue me on her knees for every moment's anguish she has caused me!"

Her voice rang discordantly through the bare room, then broke, as she flung herself back into her chair.

"Go," she exclaimed, "go and warn her, if you dare!"

She smiled at her reflection, the cruel crafty smile of the savage who is plotting the destruction of an enemy.

CHAPTER XXII

NICCOLO

I HAVE no recollection of how we got away and returned to our box. My world had suddenly been toppled from its placid base. The countess and Ramalho! That was all that I could think of. She was of too fine a fiber to deliberately stoop to take Judith's husband away from the dancer, yet Dolores Castro was sincere in her accusation. The whole affair was too dreadful to contemplate and I waited impatiently for the act to be over since McKelvie had remarked as we entered our box, "We will give ourselves the pleasure of calling on the countess at the next intermission."

I looked across toward the spot where I knew she was sitting and I caught a momentary gleam of diamonds as she moved (the theater was too dark to enable me to make out more than her outline). I recalled her boast to me that every beautiful woman possessed the power to make a man do as she wished, and I sat in misery for fifteen minutes torn between doubt and faith in the first woman who had ever succeeded in making an impression on my cold nature.

It was with a feeling of relief that I saw the curtain descend and the light flash on, and I could hardly contain myself in patience while an attendant carried our cards to the countess with the request that we be permitted to call. Graciously she acceded to our wish and we made our way through the brilliant crowds in the foyer to the entrance of her box. One moment I hesitated, then I followed McKelvie through the parted velvet curtains.

At our entrance the man who had sat behind the countess and whose face I had been unable to distinguish arose and bowed to us, whereupon the countess presented us and we bowed again, I in a state of bewilderment bordering upon insanity, for the man, though introduced to us as Senhor Andrade, was none other than Santiago's clerk, the sender of the telegram which had been signed Niccolo! At a glance from the countess, Andrade excused himself and left the box from which Parrish had already disappeared, and I followed the lanky form of the erstwhile clerk with fascinated eyes until the countess's amused voice broke in upon my stupor, and I obeyed her injunction to draw up a chair. And then I recalled why we were here alone with her, and I sat in dread of McKelvie's first words, fearful lest he should offend the countess, since her very presence had banished all my doubts concerning her. I need not have so fretted my soul. Though

he scorned subterfuge and flattery, McKelvie outdid Talleyrand himself.

The countess was leaning back in her chair languidly waving her white ostrich fan back and forth before her face as she glanced swiftly from one to the other of us. McKelvie bent toward her. "You should always wear white, Countess. Have I your permission to tell you how beautiful you are looking to-night?" he inquired softly.

She laughed and brushed his hand with the tip of her fan. "Flatterer," she replied. "I have heard that you have no use for women, and so I know that you did not come here merely to compliment me."

"You are unkind," he returned. "I was not flattering, but indulging in solemn truth. You are right as to my motive, however. I came to ask you how you enjoyed Dolores Castro."

She raised her penciled brows the fraction of an inch. "Why select her in particular? There are others who did just as well as she."

McKelvie lifted his shoulders. "I named her because she is the première danseuse. I take it that you did not care for her 'Dance of the Soul?' "

The countess shuddered. "It was too gruesome. She did not dance it when I was here last."

"Then you have seen her dance before?"

"Oh, yes," indifferently. "A number of times." She

lowered her voice. "The last time I was with Duarte Ramalho. I don't like to think of that."

"I did not know that you were on such terms of intimacy with him," put in McKelvie quickly.

"I knew him in Paris. When he heard that I was here he called and begged me to go out with him. One must amuse oneself, and Gilbert was mysteriously busy when we first came ashore," she returned with a smile.

"Was not that a rather unconventional thing for him to do, to ask you to go out with him alone? It is not done here," I amended.

"*Mon Dieu,* Professor, I cannot live within four walls because the Brazilian ladies choose to do so. I am cosmopolitan. I am not hide-bound by rules and regulations," she retorted, with an indignant upward movement of her slender white hands.

"Did Ramalho take you anywhere else besides to the theater?" McKelvie resumed his interrogation.

"We supped at a restaurant one night, a queer little place," she answered, shaking her head at him. "I knew you had a deep and sinister motive behind your call. So now I too must be put through the third degree."

"Heaven forbid," he enjoined fervently. "My motive is no deeper than this. I must have information if I am to solve this mystery and it occurred to me that I had not yet asked you any questions of importance."

"What should I know?" she queried. "But I will tell you of my movements and you can judge for yourself. At this restaurant some young woman tried to flirt with Duarte Ramalho and he was on the point of abandoning me for her society (he had had one bottle of wine too many) when I told him point-blank that he would have to see me home first; then he might return if he so desired. He had enough wits left to agree and immediately after we left the restaurant. Whether he went back or not, I have no means of knowing."

"Did you know that this woman was Dolores Castro?"

"The dancer?" There was amazement and incredulity blended in the tones of her voice. "No, I did not recognize her if it was. I had only seen her from a distance on the stage. She looked different in street costume."

"Did Ramalho tell you anything of himself and his life during these occasions?"

"No, we renewed acquaintance and talked mostly of Paris."

"What was he doing in Paris?"

She shrugged. "What do people go to Paris for, Mr. McKelvie, but to spend money? That is what he was doing, spending money. He had an unusual talent for the art."

"Would you object to telling me where you were the night of the murder?"

"I was at the Gloria Hotel in my room getting ready for my approaching marriage. I went to my room directly dinner was over and remained there throughout the entire evening," she answered slowly.

"Is not the young man to whom you just introduced me employed in Senhor Santiago's law office?"

"Yes, I believe he told me he was studying law with the old lawyer."

"Do you know the old gentleman?"

"Senhor Santiago? Not personally."

"Forgive me my importunity. How well do you know Niccolo?"

Her brows contracted as she asked in puzzled wonderment, "Who is Niccolo?"

"I understood that Niccolo was Andrade's given name," he responded.

She pursed her lips. "I only met him to-night. I can hardly be expected to know what his name is."

McKelvie rose, then stooped and picked up a gold cigarette case which he tendered to the countess with a bow. "Permit me to restore your property to you, Countess."

"Thank you. Won't you indulge?" she asked with a quizzical smile, extending the opened case.

"Not to-night, for here is your husband and our time

is up. Thank you for a pleasant ten minutes. Good evening, Countess."

"Au revoir. I trust we shall meet again sometime. Au revoir, Professor."

When we were again in the foyer, I spoke abruptly. "I'm going home, Mr. McKelvie. I have no longer any interest in the performance. You will pardon me if I desert you?"

"I shall come with you, Professor, if you have not had a surfeit of my society. I, too, have lost interest in the art of Terpsichore," he returned.

We hired a taxi and as we drove homeward McKelvie leaned back against the cushions and discussed with me the significant points in the mass of information which we had managed to gather during the last few hours.

"We clear up one difficulty, only to find ourselves impaled on the barbed wires of a new entanglement. I think we can safely piece together the first half of the picture and say that the three men, Garcia, Parrish, and Ramalho, are paying the penalty for some act in which their parents were involved. The sins of the fathers, you know. Two of the brothers have been located and killed. I cannot understand why Parrish has been overlooked."

"How do you know but that the avenger is waiting a favorable opportunity. Even as we drive home he

may be exacting the toll of another life," I exclaimed.

"We do not know, but to prevent any untoward accidents I got Diago to put a detective on Parrish's trail. This man is to watch constantly and is never to let Parrish out of his sight during the day, is to sleep before his door and challenge any who would enter, until this mystery is cleared up. I am not going to have Parrish on my conscience if I can possibly avoid it."

"Then you are convinced that Ramalho was killed because he belonged to the same race as Garcia? You do not lean toward the assumption that someone killed him out of jealousy?" I asked presently.

"You are thinking of Dolores Castro? Jealousy is a tenable theory, of course, but I do not incline toward it. I am of the opinion that the murderer, or the avenger, or whatever you choose to call him, is either Italian or of Italian extraction. I have been wrong before, I may be wrong again, but that is the theory I shall work on until I find it no longer holds water. Until that time there is no use in discarding it for a new one."

"The reason I asked you the question was this. We have only Garcia's story as corroboration of the purpose of the appearance of the skull. How do we know that he did not make up the tale? There was something in his letter to Ramalho that puzzled me. Why did he go back to the orphanage in later years. He could not

know that they had a package for him," I contended.

"His going back was the most logical thing that he could have done and that act alone stamps the letter as a truthful account. He ran away from the orphanage but when he had made his pile, the first person he thought of and would naturally think of, was the brother whom he had left behind him. The orphanage keeps a record of its inmates. Through them he was enabled to discover what had become of Parrish."

"Yet Parrish said that he did not know Garcia was his brother until he came to New York," I objected.

"It may have taken Garcia several years to locate Parrish. I should not quibble over the truth of that statement quite so much as I should at Parrish's denial of acquaintanceship with Niccolo," he commented. "If the countess only met the fellow to-night we must perforce assume that he is her husband's guest."

"Perhaps Parrish knew him only under the name of Andrade."

"Then why should the fellow sign to his telegram a name not known to the man with whom he was communicating? Niccolo is an Italian name. I shouldn't be surprised if Andrade was assumed for the evening. Perhaps the message miscarried and the spy, for that is evidently what he is, then communicated with his master in person. There is just one objection to connecting Parrish and Niccolo, though, as that would

make Parrish cognizant of the circumstances of the death of Ramalho, and I'd stake my reputation on it that he knows nothing of that affair. Therefore I shall have to look into the question of the lawyer's clerk a little more deeply before I can decide where he fits into the picture."

"As the avenger?" I suggested.

"That all depends on whether he smokes Russian cigarettes or not. By the way, we can eliminate Dolores Castro on that score. She was smoking Egyptians, if you noticed."

As he spoke another quite different scene came to my mind, a vision of my companion returning to the countess her gold case and his refusal to help himself when she held it out to him open. The case had been well-stocked with what looked to me like a foreign brand of cigarettes, yet I hesitated to ask McKelvie outright what that brand might be. I did not want him to think that I could doubt the countess for one single moment or cherish a thought against her as unworthy as the one that had flitted across my brain more than once of late.

My companion had been watching the struggle in my face. Now he laughed quietly.

"You need not be ashamed of your suspicions, Professor," he said. "I have been suspecting her myself. But set your mind at ease. The gold case was stocked

with Murads. Had the cigarettes been Russian I should not have hesitated to help myself if only to compare them with the samples already in my possession."

"I'm glad of that," I returned. "Just as I am glad that the dancer's accusations had no foundation except in her own distorted mind. I do not like to remember that the countess permitted Ramalho to take her out even if she had no motive other than just to amuse herself."

"You should not be so squeamish, Professor. Or would I be nearer the truth if I said, so jealous of her actions?" he answered with a twinkle. "Don't look so glum. I'm afraid that we have only touched the surface in this affair and that the worst is yet to come."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST ACT

McKelvie was right as usual. What had gone before was a pleasant and interesting excursion in comparison with what that day brought forth. Despite the fact that I had tossed restlessly most of the night, I woke early, so early that the sun was just beginning to bathe the mountains in a flood of gold and crimson. Donning my bathrobe I stepped out upon my balcony to watch the transformation.

Beyond the bay a golden fan of light irradiated the world, dispelling the darkness and mists of yesternight as surely from my heart as from the encircling mountains; flirting with each grim peak until it had conquered even the most inapproachable and darkest spots, and the sun himself had risen, a great red ball, to blot out the last faint shadows from the sable garments of the night.

By the time I came down to breakfast I was in quite an exalted mood and in the sunshine of Judith's beaming face, shyly reflected in that of Maria Theresa, I

quite forgot all the trials and tribulations with which the case had been previously beset. I hadn't been at table five minutes before I was hurled once more into the very thick of the fray. There was a sharp ring at the bell and the next moment McKelvie stood in the doorway. I did not need to hear his voice to know that a tragedy had occurred, for his face was gray and his eyes wore a look which was as sorrowful as it was stern.

"I'm sorry to intrude," he said, quickly, as the family rose *en masse* bristling with horrified exclamations and questions. "Can you come with me at once, Professor?" and without waiting for my answer he turned on his heel and left the house. Hastily I followed him. In the car I found the *delegado* and a smaller man, an excitable little man who kept bouncing up and down in his seat and urging the driver to hasten.

"What has happened?" I demanded. "They haven't——?"

"It's that cursed skull again," he returned somberly. "I'm afraid they've got Parrish, too."

"And the countess?" I begged fearfully.

"I don't know. The *delegado* came around for me as soon as he heard, but Diago is away and I could not make out much beyond Parrish and the skull. Ask him to give you the details, will you?" He passed his hand wearily across his forehead.

I addressed the man sitting erect and impassive be-

side us and requested him to explain what had happened. He spread out his hands, and shrugged.

"It is the dancer, Senhor, who is to blame," he replied. "The thing occurred at her house. Pires, the detective who was watching Senhor Parrish," he nodded his head toward the nervous individual in the front seat, "came to my office this morning and said that the dancer had rushed out to him and told him that Senhor Parrish was dead."

"Didn't he get any details?" I interposed, annoyed.

"He came posthaste to tell me, and of course I went at once for Senhor McKelvie."

"And you know nothing more?"

"Nothing more except that Dolores Castro kept repeating over and over something about a skull. She was dazed. He could get nothing from her."

I felt like using the countess's epithet. I told McKelvie the gist of this conversation, but he had sunk to such a low mental ebb that even their negligence failed to arouse a cutting comment. He asked me to interrogate Pires.

I leaned forward and touched the detective on the shoulder and when I had made myself clear he turned in his seat and gave me an account of his actions during the previous night. He was a voluble personage, but his information was the merest husk of his conversational orgy.

He had followed Parrish from the Palacio and to the door of his room at the Gloria Hotel. Living strictly up to the orders he had received, Pires paced the hall while he awaited the management's coöperation in the matter of a cot. While thus employed he was surprised to see Parrish leave his room and descend to the lobby. Instantly Pires was on his trail. Outside the hotel Parrish summoned a taxi and as Pires fastened himself like a barnacle to the back of the machine, the two of them arrived quite safely at the Palacio again. Here Parrish met Dolores Castro and drove her home. He only saw her as far as the door, however, and dismissing the taxi spent the night roaming the streets. True to his profession and his orders from the chief, Pires followed whither Parrish led, through broad thoroughfares, along the deserted avenues, down side streets, around the shores of the bay until the dawn began to break in the eastern sky.

Then Parrish, worn and weary with his mental fight, returned not to the Gloria but to the dancer's hotel, and Pires, seeing him safely anchored in Dolores Castro's apartments, permitted himself to rest his tired body in a chair in the lobby. His next remembrance is of the dancer in her kimono with terror-stricken face and streaming hair, screaming at the top of her voice that Parrish was dead. With his brain dulled by his heavy sleep Pires could make nothing of her account,

and decided that his duty bade him hasten to headquarters for help to straighten out the tangle.

The dancer's hotel was in one of the less reputable portions of town, a hostelry for chorus ladies and musical comedy actors, and we found the lobby alive with people, a hive of buzzing, incompetent humanity. We did not pause to parley but hurried up the stairs to the second floor where Dolores Castro had her apartment. At our knock she opened the door a crack and recognizing McKelvie she broke out into a flood of weeping reproach, spoken in almost unintelligible French.

"Do not look at me like that, Monsieur. Indeed I did not know that it would mean his death. I wanted to revenge myself. I told you I wanted to bring her to her knees. But I never dreamed that—that the skull would take him, too."

"Don't stand there chattering in the doorway. Let us in," commanded McKelvie tersely, and as she drew back he pushed past her into the room.

We followed at his heels into a large glaring apartment, overfurnished and decked out in bright colors that leaped from table cover, from hangings and walls to strike you in the face. But it was not the room that made our senses reel. It was that huddled figure lying on the floor beneath the window. It needed no second glance to tell us who it was though the scar had faded

to a dead white seam and the handsome face wore that look of horror which had startled us in the countenances of Garcia and Ramalho.

For a long tense moment we stood and gazed upon Parrish, for the knife that was buried to the hilt in his heart was proof enough that he was beyond the power of any aid we could afford him; then McKelvie kneeled down and bared the dead man's chest, for the white shirt gave evidence of having been recently pulled open. None of us were greatly amazed at finding the brand of the ivory skull, flawless and perfect, seared into the flesh. We were far more astonished to discover the skull itself lying upon the floor near his outstretched arm, and to note that in his hand he held a roll of papers, old and yellowed with the passage of time.

As McKelvie possessed himself of the papers I put forth my hand to take up the skull but he circumvented me. Scooping it up with the papers he dropped it in his pocket.

"Better not touch it," he said, as he stood up. "We have as yet no means of knowing how the acid reacts." He searched the room until his eyes fell upon the dancer who sat, a penitent heap, upon the sofa at the other end of the apartment. Slowly he walked over and seated himself beside her.

"Mademoiselle, will you tell me, please, what he was doing here in your rooms," he inquired quietly. It

was not necessary to be more explicit. She understood perfectly to whom he referred.

Dolores Castro wiped her cheeks with her bright handkerchief and gazed before her with a semitragic look in her black eyes.

"I meant him no harm," she said dolorously. "I wanted to make her suffer as she had made me, and I knew she looked on him with eyes of love." The pronouns, spoken with all the intensity of her passionate nature, were as definite as the names of the countess and Parrish would have been. "I sent him an invitation to my dressing-room during one of the *entr' actes* last night. It was after you had seen me, Monsieur. He came but he was bored."

"And so you laid a trap to snare the bird?" inquired McKelvie cuttingly as she paused.

"Yes, Monsieur. It must have been the devil himself that whispered in my ear that M. Parrish resembled that pictured face, that he might be interested in the contents of that letter I had given you. I sent him word that if he desired to know about the skull, I could tell him all he wished to learn. He got my message as he was leaving the Palacio. Half an hour later he was back in my dressing-room where I knew he would come. I told him the letter was at my hotel. He drove me home. On the way I bargained with him."

"And the bargain?"

As she narrated her evil designs her hatred of the countess had gradually conquered any softer emotion which she may have felt for Parrish's tragic end, until now she showed her teeth in a cruel smile as she revealed the lengths to which she had been willing to go to secure her rival's downfall.

"I told him a heartbreaking tale of having quarreled with my lover. The only way to make him appreciate me, I said, was to make him jealous. If M. Parrish would consent to send me flowers, to take me out once or twice I would give him the letter which I held, provided his part of the bargain were fulfilled first. He refused indignantly. He declared I had no such letter. I let him see that I knew something of the skull, enough to frighten him considerably, and he said he would think it over and give me his decision in the morning."

She swept on passionately. "I cared nothing that when the time was up I would have no information to reveal. I only knew that if M. Parrish took me out even once I should contrive that she should know it and that she feel the pangs of jealousy which I have felt. In the morning early, so early that I was still abed, M. Parrish returned. I admitted him to my sitting-room. He declared himself willing to do as I asked if only I would tell him what I knew of the skull. He was in mortal fear; his face was white and haggard; he looked like a man who had not slept. I told him

to wait while I hunted the letter. I could have laughed aloud at the way fate had played into my hands. I slipped out into the hall and went downstairs to phone the countess. But I could not get the connection, so I returned upstairs. When I entered this room I found him there alone, dead, as you see him now, Monsieur. I do not know who killed him. I only know I did not wish him any harm." Her voice dropped to a frightened whimper again.

There was loathing as well as contemptuous pity in the glance McKelvie bestowed upon the dancer. She caught the look and flared out at him with a last spark of sulphurous hatred.

"You think me vile, you look down and despise me," she broke out, "and you condemn without understanding. No man can understand the feelings and thoughts of a woman who has been scorned, whose soul is goaded on by the pricks of jealousy to gain her ends by any means she can. A curse upon you. May you too suffer as I have done!"

Like a hissing venomous serpent, she glided to the door and slammed it to behind her. We all drew relieved breaths at the breaking of the high tension under which we had been held by the dancer's fury, and the *delegado* crossed himself to ward off the curse.

McKelvie was the first to speak. Taking a card from his pocket he inscribed a few words on it, slipped

it into an envelope which he borrowed from the dancer's desk, then he laid a hand upon my arm.

"Tell Pires to take this to the countess," he said, "and ask the *delegado* to take some of his men and bring Santiago's clerk here at once."

Dazedly I obeyed him and when the two Brazilians had departed on their separate errands I asked McKelvie the question which had been uppermost in my mind since entering the room.

"You have told the countess the truth?" I inquired. "That her husband, too, is a victim of the skull?"

"I have told her the truth," he repeated solemnly. "God have pity upon her."

He shook off impatiently the lethargy which had assailed him since hearing of Parrish's death, and unrolled the papers he still carried in his hand. Together we bent over the manuscript, for that is what it was, a manuscript written in Italian and dated 1762. I am transcribing the legend as we read it on that fated morning in Dolores Castro's sitting-room.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE LEGEND OF THE SKULL

"My son,

The learned doctors tell me that I have not long to live and thou art far from home; therefore must I confide to paper what should be only for thine ears to hear, the story of that dread deed of long ago that has left its mark upon our house. Guard well the secret and when thy turn comes to face thy Maker intrust the tale to thy son that it may be preserved throughout the ages yet to come. From my father I had the narrative in this wise.

In the year 1550 of our Lord, the head of the house of Giovanni was a handsome, bold, but cruel and sinister man who bore the name of Lord Giaco. Though he had a goodly portion of this world's goods and could have bought himself the privilege of remaining home, he was also a soldier and fonder of the sword than of the hunt. For this reason he cast in his lot with the Emperor Charles V. Before he left home to go to war,

Giaco, that his race might not die out, contracted a marriage with a lady of high birth with whom, it was rumored, he had long been in love.

But though the lady, her name has been lost throughout the centuries, married Lord Giaco in obedience to the will of her parents, she hated and feared him for his cruelty, and when he was safely gone, she entertained secretly at the castle the man she really cared for. One of the servants, as crafty as his master, got wind of the affair and postehasted it to warn Giaco. The fury of the wronged husband was terrible to behold and the servant cowered beneath the lash of his words. When he had quieted down Giaco ordered his horse saddled and rode at a gallop through the night and storm until he came in sight of his castle where one light like a beacon told him that he should find the pair he sought in the great, high-ceilinged room that served as an antechamber to his own apartments. Flinging the bridle over his horse's neck, he leaped from the saddle, and knocked at the door. The old major-domo opened to his master but without a word Giaco strode past the old man and went clanking up the stairs, his sword rattling in its sheath and his spurs jingling at every step. But the lovers heard him not and he stood in the doorway, a grim and terrible figure, until a chance sound directed his wife's attention to the door. With a cry of horror she bade her lover flee

but he had no more than reached the casement when Giaco, drawn sword in hand, overtook his rival and ran him through before his lady's eyes. Then gathering her fainting form in his arms he bore her to the tower where he kept her imprisoned until such a time as he could wreak upon her a vengeance the like of which only his cruel and crafty nature could devise.

He caused to have made a miniature in ivory of that dead lover's skull and into it he poured a powerful acid which a chemist had invented, an acid so constructed in its proportions that it would burn the flesh whereon it fell as red-hot iron burns it; yet it affected in no wise the ivory of which the fateful skull had been evolved. Into his wife's presence then he came one day and telling her jeeringly whose skull he bore he branded her upon the forehead much as in a later day criminals were branded for breaking the law. Standing above her where she lay before him with disheveled tresses, he pronounced his curse upon her.

'Thou shalt live to old age spurned and scorned by humankind for death shall flee thee until thou hast paid in full; thou shalt bear a son and thou shalt live to see him die by violence; dying he shall be damned eternally and the curse shall follow him through all generations forever and ever.'

He looked upon her with cruel eyes as he hurled his hatred at her and she cowered in terror but when he

was done she gave a laugh, high and shrill, a laugh that chilled his blood and made his heart stand still.

'Thou hast cursed thine own,' she shrilled. 'Behold, the son that I shall bear within the month is thine.'

Such, my son, is the legend of the skull which has come down to me and because of Giaco's mad passion we too are accursed, for always there is trouble in our family. Keep secret the skull and the formula of that acid, for who knows but that thou, too, mayst need to avenge thyself in some such wise. God's blessing upon thee.

FRANCESCO GIOVANNI.

In the year 1762."

Slowly McKelvie rolled up the manuscript and extended it to me. "This is more in your line than mine, Professor," he remarked, and watched me bestow it with utmost care in one of my pockets. The manuscript was priceless. I knew several archæologists who would have given their right hands to possess it.

"What an exquisite refinement of torture those fellows were capable of devising," continued McKelvie thoughtfully. "The Inquisition was merciful by comparison. There is no physical pain or suffering which can wring the soul as a tortured mind can wring it."

"But," I expostulated, "this is merely a legend. There may be no truth in it."

"How about the skull, Professor? That is not an illusion, is it?" he retorted calmly.

"You don't mean that you take that curse of Giaco's seriously in this day and age?" I could not believe that he was superstitious.

"In this day and age," he repeated and laughed gratingly, cynically. "Are you implying that civilization has made us less cruel, more charitable toward the actions and of the motives of our fellow-men?" He pointed to the body of Parrish which still lay upon the floor before the window. "There is your answer, sir. Civilization? Do you suppose his torment was any less vivid, any less terrible than that of the lady who caused the original trouble? In 1550 war spelled no such civilized attainments as poisoned gas, and submarines, and the wholesale slaughter of the aged and innocent." He gloomed in silence with brooding eyes as though his mind had revivified scenes which he never could forget; then he roused himself with an impatient shrug. "What crime were these three brothers guilty of to cause so terrible a vengeance to overtake them? Or does it go further back, as I hinted before, and is their mother to blame that they have met their end so tragically?"

I was doing some thinking of my own. "I do not see how she could have been to blame. She was the wife of a Brazilian; these men were her sons and his if we are to believe Garcia's letter. It may be that she is of the race of Giovanni, but that would mean that the curse is still active and I don't see how it can be."

"Neither do I. A curse that holds good for some four hundred odd years is a remarkable phenomenon. Like the White Queen I have trained myself to believe in all manner of impossible things, but I'll have to draw the line at that. We should be nearer the truth if we were to hazard that some man has dared to utilize the legend for his own vile purpose."

"You are referring to Niccolo?" I asked.

He answered the question by throwing open the door. "Here come the police. I hope they were in time."

But evidently something was wrong, for they were empty-handed; the *delegado* very much out of breath and not a little annoyed, his men looking sheepish and crestfallen.

"We went at once to Senhor Santiago's office," he said to me, mopping his bald head with a large red-silk bandana. "The clerk was missing. Senhor Santiago had not seen him since yesterday afternoon. Then we went to his lodgings. He had left early this morning, bag and baggage. While we talked to the landlady, he suddenly appeared in the doorway but at sight of us

he turned tail and fled and we after him. He had a taxi at the door. By the time we got into our car and got it started he was far ahead. He made for the Central Station but when we got there he was nowhere to be seen. He must have left by the first train. We are making inquiries. It is the best we can do now."

The *delegado* shook his head as much as to say that he was not altogether to blame that the quarry had evaded him, but McKelvie, when he had heard the report, did not seem to be greatly overwrought over the escape of Niccolo. He was listening intently to the sound of hurrying feet.

"The countess," he said quickly.

"The countess!" I echoed in alarm. "Good heavens, man, keep her out of this room!" and I looked apprehensively toward the window.

"The man is her husband. We cannot keep her out," he replied shortly. "Tell the *delegado* he will be more useful tracking down Niccolo than standing around in this room of death."

Scarcely had the *delegado* removed himself with his men than Nita, her face white and piteous, stood in the door. Straight as a ray of light her eyes flashed to the window and the next moment she had crossed the intervening space to her husband's side. I braced myself for a scene but she made no sound, just knelt there

with clasped hands as if she were praying, motionless and rigid as an effigy in stone.

Very slowly and very quietly McKelvie closed the door and into that pregnant silence his words dropped hollowly like dead weights falling through cavernous depths.

"Nita Giovanni, I arrest you for the murder of Garcia, of Ramalho, and lastly of your husband, Gilbert Parrish."

I stood dumb, stricken, waiting to hear her deny the monstrous accusation, but she never moved and he swept on with growing passion, "Why have you done this thing? What crime have these men committed against yourself that you could deliberately kill them one by one? Had you no love for the man you married that you could plunge a dagger into his heart?"

"Mr. McKelvie," I cried out, unable to believe my ears, "what are you saying?" and then I fell silent as Nita half turned toward us.

"It was because I loved him so very much that I killed him," she replied sadly. "Niccolo came to me this morning and told me that Gilbert had spent the night here with Dolores Castro. Gilbert had left me without a word and so I believed what Niccolo told me. Do you think I am the kind to stand that?" she demanded with a passionate gesture.

"I told you in my note where your husband had spent the night," interjected McKelvie harshly.

"I know it was all a mistake." She fell to weeping softly. "But he will forgive me. It was not I that was to blame but Niccolo and my fear of the skull. I might have known I could not sweep aside the curse so lightly."

McKelvie went over to her and attempted to raise her but she resisted his efforts.

"No, let me stay here beside him, Monsieur." She sat down on the floor and took Parrish's head in her lap brushing the thick hair gently with her fingertips.

"Will you tell us your story, Madame?" asked McKelvie. "I have guessed a part but I am still ignorant of the real motive back of this affair."

For a long time she sat and stared vacantly into space before her like a person whose brain has become numbed by too much suffering, then as the sense of his words penetrated at last to her consciousness, she looked up at him and nodded.

"Yes, I will tell you," she answered wearily and I saw her eyes wander to the spot where the skull had lain and to the hand that had held the manuscript. "Perhaps you had better be seated for it's a long story, Monsieur."

McKelvie took up a position in the embrasure of the window where he could watch her face while I chose a

chair beside the table in the center of the room, chose it in a daze like a man who is held in the grip of a nightmare. And sitting there on the floor with the dead man's head in her lap Nita Giovanni told us the story of her ill-starred life.

CHAPTER XXV

THE FULFILMENT OF THE CURSE

"You have read the legend and so you know something of the motive that caused me to take these lives. If I am to blame, my education is at fault. I was born and brought up for just such a terrible purpose as this, born in hate and nurtured in hate that a man might carry out his one insane desire for vengeance upon the woman who betrayed him. Do not judge me until you have heard the truth, I beg you."

The beautiful eyes turned in soft appeal toward McKelvie and the set lines of his face relaxed as he promised her this consideration.

"Many years ago my father fell in love with a beautiful young woman, Nita Carini. He wooed and won her and prepared with joy to attend the wedding to which he had invited all his many high-born friends. The marriage was to take place in the cathedral; the guests were gathered for the ceremony; the bishop himself had arrived; the moment came for the bride to appear, but no bride could be found. Her parents declared that she had come with them to the church.

Time passed but no bride was forthcoming and then as they were about to make search someone handed the groom a telegram.

" 'When you read these lines, I shall be on my way to marry the man I love. Forgive me and forget.

NITA.'

"Had she told him her intentions previous to the date of the wedding he might have forgiven, but she had made him the butt of the community, she had jilted him at the very steps of the altar. In his veins ran the blood of the cruel Giaco. He lifted up his voice and cursed her there before them all and then he strode away to find a means of avenging the pride which she had cut so deeply."

She related the story in a dreary monotone, too tired to feel any resentment against the persons who were responsible for her troubles.

"The legend was a curiosity in the family. For months my father brooded over it while he endeavored to wrench from the old formula the secret of the acid. But he wrought in vain, whether because it was not complete or because he could not get hold of the proper chemicals, I do not know, and so he was forced to postpone the idea of immediate vengeance. And as he brooded a bigger, more terrible scheme leaped into being in his mad and crafty brain. He had learned that

Nita Carini was living happily in Paris; that she expected soon to become a mother. He went secretly to the French capital and the night the child was born he contrived to creep into the room where the child lay and, rendering the nurse insensible by a judicious application of chloroform, he pricked into the child's arm the outline of a skull.

"He had once, in the days of their courtship, read to Nita the legend of the skull, telling her laughingly that should she ever prove untrue to her marriage vows her children would be damned. Imagine her feelings when she saw that mark upon her babe, for she was intensely superstitious and very devout. If she lived in fear and dread she kept it to herself.

"My father returned home and married that he might have a son to carry on the work he had begun. Heaven granted his desire but the child lived a bare three years and in the meantime Nita had borne another son. True to his plan my father again secretly marked the babe for his own. And still the formula preserved its secret though he worked upon it night and day.

"At the birth of her third son, Nita's terror had grown into conviction. She had drawn upon herself the vengeance of the skull and she feared for her children's souls. She deserted her husband and disappeared with her two eldest sons. Nothing daunted, my father set about discovering her whereabouts but when he finally

located her he found her dead. It was then that his brain cracked, for he felt that she had eluded him, and he made up his mind that her sons should pay for her escape. So wild and cruel, and yet so cunning did he become that he was known throughout the neighborhood as the 'Mad Count.'

"It was just about this time that my mother brought me into the world and my father deemed that I had been given him in answer to his prayers. He named me Nita and, as my mother died shortly after, he had the sole care of me. He taught me to hate all men, but Nita's sons especially. I came to think of them as monsters who should be destroyed that the world might be freed from their dire presence. I looked upon myself as the chosen instrument of the gods and I became almost as fanatical as my father himself. He taught me particularly to flirt, to coquette, to break hearts and laugh while doing it. And then when he considered my education complete he sent me to Paris to practice upon the moths who fluttered about the light of my beauty.

"And always he worked upon the formula, for in his distorted mind vengeance would not be complete without the skull. And he would have failed but for Niccolo, my cousin, who came to pay him a visit, Niccolo, who was a chemist and to whom my father showed the formula. The acid was brewed and I was sent for. When I had received my instructions (my father had

never lost sight of the three young men) he made me swear by all I held sacred that I would not fail him. I swore but he was not satisfied and he pronounced upon me Giaco's curse if I should leave one of the three alive."

If one is tempted to condemn her for accepting this trust, remember that to her that curse was potent, that the saving of her soul meant more to her than the taking of a life.

She went on more slowly. "I met Garcia on the steamer coming to New York. I made myself so fascinating that he proposed and I accepted him. That was part of the game. When we arrived in port, he left me in the city while he went West on business. I sent him a card to notify him that he was doomed."

"How could you know that he would understand the significance of that card?" interrupted McKelvie.

"Because when he proposed to me he told me he had something to tell me which might affect my answer and he gave me his mother's letter to read. She claimed that she came from a race accursed and to me who knew the truth this seemed but added aggravation. Sometime later as it drew near the time to take vengeance Garcia returned to New York and sent me a letter in which he said that he intended to die that night to cheat the avenger. In fear that he might kill himself I disguised myself as a man and went to his

hotel. I got there about quarter to twelve and when I saw him lying in the chair with closed eyes and a knife in his chest I thought he had cheated me and caused my father's curse to fall upon me. But when I got close to him I saw he was still alive. The knife had not gone in deep enough. I brought him back to consciousness and forced him to recognize me, telling him the truth about his mother and the skull. When he looked at me in horror I killed him, branded him and fled.

"Don't think I don't hate myself for what I did," she exclaimed. "From the moment I met Gilbert I have despised myself and oh, how I have hated the man who made me what I am."

"Yet you killed Ramalho after you met Parrish," put in McKelvie.

She drew a sobbing breath. "Yes, yes, but it was fear and Niccolo that drove me on. When I met Gilbert I had decided to go to Rio, knowing that Ramalho lived there and I determined to make Gilbert follow me because it was too dangerous to commit another murder of the same type in New York. On the steamer I fell in love with Gilbert and when he proposed I accepted him in earnest."

"One moment. Was it you who took the skull from the professor?"

"Yes. I wore it on a chain about my neck. Somehow it became loosened and I thought I had lost it. I

was just emerging from the companionway to look for it when I saw the professor standing there looking at it. I did not want to have to go into any explanations so I snatched it from him just as Gilbert passed by." She spoke as though I had no existence for her.

"When I got to Rio I made up my mind that I was through. I would brave the curse for I could not kill the man I loved nor would I take vengeance upon Ramalho for he was married and I did not care to make his wife unhappy. Then Niccolo turned up. He had promised my father that he would make me kill these men. He pointed out to me that Ramalho was a bad husband, that I would be doing the wife a favor to kill him, but I refused. Then he said that he himself would kill Gilbert unless I obeyed. He gave me but a few days. To save the man I loved, I sent for Ramalho. I had met him in Paris. I flirted with him and got him sufficiently interested in me to make him willing to give me a rendezvous. Then I sent him the skull. Niccolo had told me because he had learned of it from the lawyer Santiago that Ramalho had received a box left by Garcia, and so again I knew he would understand. There was no time to send a card, besides, I had another motive. My father had said that if the victim destroyed the skull the curse would be at an end, and oh, how I prayed that Ramalho would have the sense to rid himself of the hateful object."

"Why did you not send it to Parrish instead. He would have destroyed it," interposed McKelvie.

She wrung her hands. "How could I know that and if he did not I would have had to kill him. No, I dared not trust to luck in his case."

She added presently, "Gilbert called on Ramalho the day I sent the skull and so I went with him to see how Ramalho was affected. He took Gilbert out of the room to get a drink, then came hurrying back alone. He said he was going away and could not meet me. I told him that at eight in his library would suit me just as well, that I had something of importance to tell him. He acquiesced and went back to Gilbert. It was then that I saw the dagger on the table. I took it away with me. That night I reached the house too early. I smoked a cigarette until a light flashed on and I saw him at the library window. I entered and told him I had come for the skull. He was a coward. He had thrown it into an uncovered urn in a fit of temper. He recovered it for me and when he faced me again I told him I was the avenger and killed him. He fell on his face and I had to turn him over. I did not want anyone to be blamed for the crime so I drew out the knife and wiped the blade, putting the weapon back on the table where I had found it. I had my gloves on so I did not think of wiping the hilt. Then I branded the body and hurried away.

"The rest you know. I married Gilbert but I had no peace. Niccolo kept tormenting me but I would not heed him, and then this morning he came to tell me what he knew would make me take Gilbert's life. He said that my husband was here with that woman. I, to be scorned for Ramalho's paramour!"

It was almost a repetition of the expression the dancer had used but Nita's indignation and passionate avowal were superb in comparison and I began to understand something of the untamed nature which her father and Niccolo had played upon, harping ever, as a minstrel might, in a persistent monotone, upon the strings of hatred and of fear.

"Niccolo taunted me and I snatched up the knife he offered and hastened to see for myself whether he spoke the truth. When I saw Gilbert here in her room I was beside myself. I held out the skull to him and told him the truth. Before he could explain himself I had killed him, I, who would have died to save him."

She looked down upon Parrish with quivering lips and then before either of us could move to prevent her, she plucked the knife from out his chest and plunged it to the hilt in her own fair breast.

I turned away my face but McKelvie was made of sterner stuff. He spoke to her again. "And this man, your father, is he still living?"

She fumbled at her dress and drew out from a hidden

pocket a cablegram which she extended to McKelvie. He read it aloud.

"Your father dead."

"It came—this morning . . . When I got back—I found it," she added.

"Where has Niccolo gone?"

"I do—not know." She made a movement as though to draw out the dagger, then she shook her head with a tremulous smile. "After all," she whispered, "it is only —a little while longer, and I would not spoil—the dress he liked so well."

She was a glorious woman, Nita Giovanni, Contessa di Sforza. What an infinite pity that hers should have been so tragic a fate!

CHAPTER XXVI

CONCLUSION

We took the skull to Penna and when he had emptied it of its acid McKelvie presented me with the curio. I accepted the gift gladly since not even its ghastly history could lessen its value in my eyes. As we left the doctor's office I asked McKelvie a question which had been in my mind since I had learned the truth concerning the mystery of the skull.

"Did you know that the countess was responsible when you heard of Parrish's death?" I asked.

He nodded. "I knew last night, that is, I guessed as much. I had noticed when we called on her at the Palacio that she was fanning herself with her left hand. When I arrived home I got Diago to send for a copy of Niccolo's telegram. It was addressed Sra. not Sr. Gilbert Parrish. You noticed only the name and jumped to the conclusion that the telegram was for the husband and not the wife."

"I had no possible idea that he was married," I retorted in extenuation.

He went right on as though I had not spoken. "This morning I received confirmation from Paris and Italy. Nita Carini had jilted the Count of Sforza to marry Manoel Ramalho. The Count of Sforza was named Francesco Giovanni, and he was Nita's father. When I had read the legend I had the whole case revealed to me like an open book."

"Yet you asked her for her story?"

"I wanted to learn all the ramifications and I was curious to know how she reconciled her actions," he replied.

Nothing affected him. I passed on to something else. "Why did you tell me, then, that she did not smoke Russian cigarettes?"

"That was a quibble. I was referring to the gold-case I had handed her. It was a man's case and it bore the initials G. P. Her husband's, of course. I knew you would misunderstand me but I had an end in view. I wanted to set your mind at ease, Professor."

"Then you would have let her go free?" I demanded.

"Last night I would have. She was merely the tool. But when she killed Parrish, she took the case out of my hands. I could not condone that last act."

"Did you know that she intended to kill herself?"

"I hoped she would. It was the best way out for everyone concerned."

"And Niccolo?"

"Let us consult the *delegado* for the latest reports concerning that young man. We have nothing against him, however. We cannot jail him for talking to the countess."

At the precinct the *delegado* was looking very grave. "Ah, Senhor, you are just in time to hear the news. The train that Niccolo escaped on was wrecked and he it seems was one of the few who were killed."

McKelvie's lips moved softly as though he were talking to himself, *"Sic periunt mali Dei gratia,"* he murmured.

Outside the police station McKelvie extended his hand to me. "I think we can call this the end, Professor. I shall delegate to you the task of telling Mr. Clinton the story of the skull. The case has not ended as he thought it would, but at least he can set his mind at ease concerning the part played by his own family. I have enjoyed knowing you, Professor."

"And I," I replied, "have been greatly edified and honored in having been allowed to watch you work out this problem."

He made a wry face. "Hardly edified, Professor. I cannot claim that the case has redounded to my glory. I shall have to mark it up against me as one time when I went wrong."

I did not agree with him. After all he brought it to a successful conclusion and he started the race under a double handicap—an unfamiliar language and a crime whose beginnings in New York he was practically unacquainted with.

THE END

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